

THE TAI OF ASSAM  
AND ANCIENT TAI RITUAL

Volume I

Life-cycle Ceremonies

by

B. J. TERWIEL

CENTRE FOR SOUTH EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
GAYA

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*General Editor*

SACHCHIDANAND SAHAI

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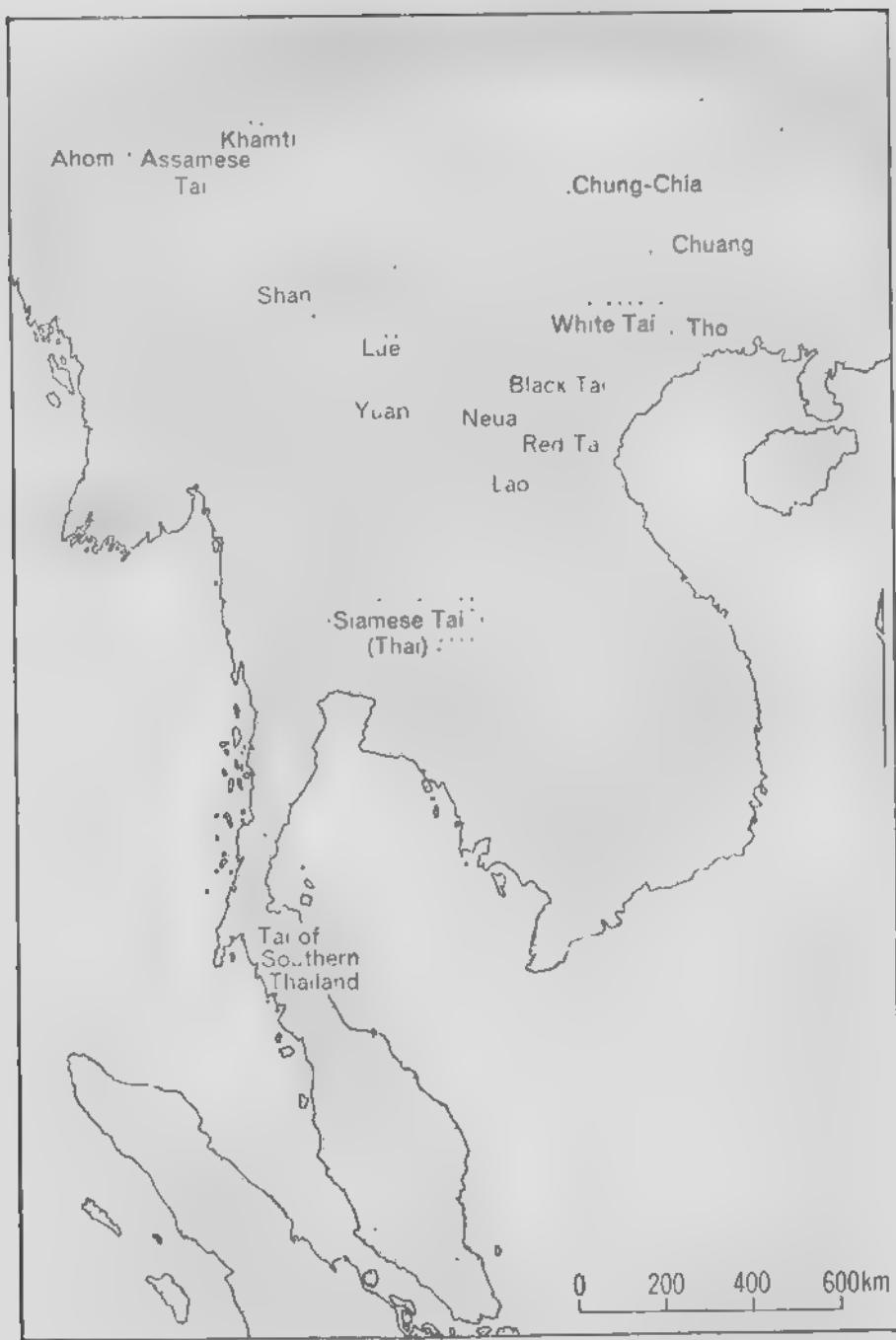
## INTRODUCTION

This book represents a scholarly exercise in which certain rituals and customs of groups of Assamese Tai are placed in a wider perspective. The Tai of Assam come originally via mainland Southeast Asia, where at present Tai form the most numerous and most widespread of the indigenous populations. In this book certain 140-cycle rituals are scrutinized and an attempt is made to determine how much of the Ancient Tai customs has been retained by the Tai of Assam.

This introduction consists of four parts. First there is a section dealing with the Tai and their possible origin. Then follows a short overview of the Ahom involvement with Assam. The third section describes the Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti groups of Tai speakers whose customs form the basis of this book. Finally there is a note on the aims and methods of this study.

Before broaching the question of origins, we need to define the word 'Tai'. In a twentieth century context the term is almost self-evident: Tai peoples are all those groups who speak languages which have been recognised as Tai, such as the Shan, Khamti, Lue, Yuan, Thai, Lao, Nien, Black Tai, White Tai, Red Tai, Tho and Chung Chia. When dealing with theories and speculations about Tai groups which may go back thousands of years in time, the label Tai is not so easily applied. We have no written Tai records before the thirteenth century A.D. and all observations relating to the Tai before that time rest upon scholarly reconstructions. Linguists talk about 'Ancient Tai' and 'Proto-Tai', geneticists try to reconstruct aspects of an original Tai gene-pool, and in an ethno-historical work such as this an anthropologist attempts to build up a picture of some Tai customs and beliefs relevant to a time when the Tai peoples formed a much more homogeneous group than at present. It is clear that for such purposes, the term Tai used as a purely linguistic label is inadequate and needs to include other criteria. For the purpose of this study, the term Tai is used for all peoples for whom we may assume a Tai culture; that is, if they share not only Tai speech, but also other aspects of culture which may be considered 'typically Tai'.

The term Tai should therefore not be read to indicate a specific racial group. There are not sufficient comparative genetic studies to sort out what may have been aspects of an 'original' gene pool amongst the Tai peoples when they may have formed still a relatively homogeneous population. From a historical perspective it is quite clear that the Tai culture often spread by way of an administrative elite imposing its way of life upon the local peoples it encountered during its spreading over large tracts of Southeast Asia. The cultural Tai boundaries are not rigidly applicable to just the one type of person. The process of the spreading Tai culture must instead be seen as a two-way process: as the Tai elite influenced local indigenous cultures, so the local cultures left their mark upon the Tai. Indeed,



MAP 1: The Distribution of Main Tai-speaking Groups in Mainland Southeast Asia and Southern China

when the Tai peoples began to play the major role in some of the larger river basins, the mixture of cultures is most apparent. The Tai of the Chao Phraya delta, which is now central Thailand, adopted many Mon and Khmer features in their language and customs, yet retained sufficient Tai characteristics to warrant the label Tai. The Akha people of the Brahmaputra valley, as we shall see later in this chapter, became so influenced by the indigenous culture that they eventually lost much of the Tai culture.

The use of the term Tai when dealing with the period of many centuries does not mean that the concept is unchanging and eternal. In fact, in the first section of this chapter it will be argued that the concept appears only useful from the time when we may assume a relatively homogeneous 'Proto-Tai' culture to have existed to the present. Further back in time, probably during the first millennium B.C. the concept becomes less useful since we cannot as yet determine how 'Proto-Tai' came into existence. We may safely assume that 'Proto-Tai' culture was itself the end result of developments which are as yet unknown.

In this book some customs of Assamese Tai are compared with those of other Tai groups, so that aspects of Tai culture in general will be elucidated. This is by no means the first time that the whole range of Tai groups comes under scrutiny. Various anthropologists have attempted to characterise the Tai by producing glossaries of aspects of Tai culture.<sup>1</sup> From such accounts it can readily be seen that:

Historically, as today, these people appear as valley-dwelling wet-rice growers, a fact that gives to the cultures of most Tai-speaking populations a certain uniformity.

Or we read about the 'well-known propensity of the Tai for forming complex sociopolitical structures', they 'may be seen historically as a people with some assimilative ability and a tendency in the direction of social organization'.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the religious beliefs which all 'tribal Tai' have in common, Embree and Thomas remark:<sup>3</sup>

There are phu of all kinds: guardians of the earth and village, the evil spirits of those who suffered a violent death, bearers of disease, tormentors, who watch over the crops etc. Outside each village is a small pagoda for the guardian of the village, and inside each house are one or more altars for the ancestors and the guardian of the hearth. The religious practitioners are the heads of the families who are responsible for the ancestors and the various classes of shamans, generally hereditary, who know how to bid cast off etc., commune with the spirits, cure the sick, interpret dreams, etc. A few local festivals are held, for the New Year, for the dead, and the harvest... .

Whilst such surveys are valuable and they serve to indicate common themes in the range of Tai cultures, the resulting generalizations appear to be applicable to many other cultures, they aid but little in obtaining a picture of what constitutes Tai culture at some time before the thirteenth century.

<sup>1</sup> J. F. Embree and W. L. Thomas, *The Ethnic Groups of Mankind Southeast Asia*, *Ethnic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia*, Cultural Report Series No. 2, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1950; E. Seidensticker, *The Thai Peoples*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1958; P. M. Lebar (et. al.), *A Basic Bibliography of Southeast Asia*, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Liaotic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia*, p. 123.

A.D. There have also clearly attempted to determine more detailed information about the early Tai culture by comparing a series of Tai groups. Potier compares Lao oral data with those of the White, Black and Red Tai and establishes aspects of an 'Archaic Tai' religion, such as the existence of various ancestral beings called *thor* and aspects of shamanistic rites.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Archaibault has taken note of Lao oral, Ahom and various other Tai traditions from eastern Laos and northern Vietnam to discuss the Tai legend of the creation of the world.<sup>6</sup> Bromman attempts to establish aspects of early Tai political institutions by comparing Thai data with that of Tai minority groups in Laos and northern Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

This study may be regarded as in the same tradition. Through a comparison of various Tai groups an attempt is made to determine what these have in common and to establish which aspects are likely to have been part of a pre-thirteenth century Tai culture. The data from the Assamese Tai form an important link in the chain of comparisons. First, however, a few paragraphs must be devoted to the vexed question of the origin of the Tai.

#### SECTION I : THE TAI PEOPLES, THEIR LIKELY ORIGIN AND THEIR SPREAD<sup>8</sup>

Most educated Assamese are aware of the important role of Tai peoples upon the history of the country. If they are asked where these Tai people originally came from, the answer is usually: 'From Mongolia'. The presumed Mongolian background of the Tai is reflected, for example in the name of a committee established not long ago in order to foster Tai political interests: The Ahom Tai Mongoliya Rajya Parishad.

The voyage from Mongolia to Assam is usually seen as beginning in the second millennium B.C. when various tribes invaded northwestern China.

One of these tribes which ruled over a state in the Yangtse Valley was of an independent type in it. They called themselves the *Tai*, or the Independent, and were a constant source of trouble to the Chinese Emperor in the 3rd Century A.D. They were driven down to the Hunan area to the south.<sup>9</sup>

A strikingly similar origin is recounted by the Tai of central Thailand. A government sponsored lecturer on the origin of the Tai peoples recounted how some seven thousand years ago, the Tai peoples lived at the foot of the Altai mountains in central Mongolia and through the millennia they moved southwards to end up occupying large tracts of southeast Asia.

<sup>5</sup> R. Potier, 'Note sur les chamans et médiums de quelques groupes thai' *Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Indo-Nébien*, Volume IV, No. 1, Pt. 1, 1973, pp. 99-109.

<sup>6</sup> C. Archaibault, 'La naissance du monde selon les traditions lao' *Structures religieuses lao, (rites et mythes)*. Vientiane: Vithagna, 1973, pp. 97-130.

<sup>7</sup> B. M. Bromman, 'Early Political Institutions of the Thai: Synthesis and Symbiosis', University of Washington M.A. Thesis, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the observations in this section of the Introduction can be found in my 'Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered', *Oriens Extremus*, Volume 25, Part 2, 1978, pp. 239-58.

<sup>9</sup> R. M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, as cited by E. T. D. Lambert, 'A Short Account of the Ahom People', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XL, Pt. 1, 1952, p. 39.

The idea that the Tai originally came from Mongolia probably stems from a misreading of a statement by Terrien de Lacouperie who wrote that China received its language, arts, sciences and institutions from the 'colonies of the Ugro-Altaic Bak families who came from Western Asia some twenty-three centuries B.C.'<sup>10</sup> This statement was intended simply as a general background of the origin of the Chinese and the author does not indicate whether or not the Tai peoples were amongst these 'colonies'. It was, however, taken to mean just that and became popularized through books such as Dodd's which spread the idea of a Mongolian origin of the Tai.<sup>11</sup>

Although nobody is as yet certain where the ancestors of the Tai peoples lived several millennia B.C., it is highly unlikely that it was anywhere near Mongolia. The Tai peoples are everywhere intimately associated with rice-growing in the relatively warm and flat lowlands of southern China and mainland Southeast Asia. Their traditional houses are also adapted to suit the wet lowlands: these are built on stilts. A culture which originates from Mongolia and travels during the last millennia B.C. through the northern Chinese deserts to warmer regions cannot be associated with irrigated rice and houses on stilts. There is no historical or archaeological evidence which makes it plausible that the Tai ever were within a thousand miles of Mongolia or the Altai mountains.

The Assamese Tai have also been ready to accept the idea of a 'Mongolian' background to the Tai peoples because they often feel that the Tai look quite Mongolian. The idea that Tai features could be Mongolian is not so much based upon comparison with actual people from Mongolia as upon the belief that a relatively light skin colour, combined with the occasional occurrence of the epicanthic fold determine a 'Mongolian stock'. Whilst it is quite true that the Assamese Tai often are a shade lighter in pigmentation than many of the other Indian Assamese, and that there are instances of the 'Mongolian' epicanthic fold amongst the Tai, it should be remembered that the Assamese have no means of comparing the Tai with other Southeast Asian peoples. To the observer who is familiar with the peoples of Southeast Asia, the Tai show a certain measure of mixing with Chinese populations, but at the same time they appear clearly genetically linked with Southeast Asian peoples. Scholars who have looked at the genetic distance between Tai and Chinese on the one hand, and Tai and Austronesian on the other, find that the Tai are closer to Austronesians than to Chinese.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A. E. J. B. Terrien de Lacouperie, 'The Cradle of the Shan Race', in A. R. Colquhoun *Amongst the Shans*, New York: Paragon Reprints, 1970, p. xxix.

<sup>11</sup> W. C. Dodd, *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese* (compiled and edited by his wife) Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1923.

<sup>12</sup> E. Seidenfaden, in his review of *Ethnic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia*, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XL, Pt. 1, 1952, p. 78, and also his 'The Origin of the Vietnamese', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLVI, Pt. 1, 1958, p. 32, citing the

work of Mancette and Bezocier. See also Somsak Phansomboon, 'A Bioserological Consideration of the Migration of the Thai Race', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLV, Pt. 2, 1957, pp. 55-64; K. T. Simmons, 'The Biological Origin of Australian Aboriginals, An Examination of Blood Group Genes and Gene Frequencies for Possible Evidence in Populations 'from Australia to Eurasia', in *The Origin of the Australians*, (R. L. Kirk and A. G. Thorne, editors), Canberra: Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1976, p. 318.

There is yet another legend associated with the early Tai which persists in the Tai legends, namely the legend that the ancient kingdom of Nanchao (in Yunnan, eighth to thirteenth century A.D.) was a Tai kingdom. This may have been. Ferrien de Lacouperie who began the story, after six centuries, taking his identification for granted, added more and more convincing details. Ferrien de Lacouperie proposed that the Mung tribes, whom he recognized as Tai, formed the leading clan in the Nanchao migration. The first doubts on the Tai ness of Nanchao were formulated by Credner in 1935, and his statements have been followed by so many other critical studies<sup>15</sup> that at present it is widely accepted that the Nanchao kingdom was never dominated by the Tai.<sup>16</sup>

It is relatively easy to reject, through lack of concrete evidence, the theories which place the Tai peoples' origins in Mongolia and to break the tentative connections between the Tai and Nanchao. More difficult to refute are the proclamations of many scholars of a Tai 'home-land' as far back as the first, second or third millennium B.C. For example, basing himself upon similarities of a handful of Chou and Pang words with Tai, Wiens is willing to label the ancient Chou and Pang as Tai speakers. Von Eickstedt boldly assigns inhabitants of an fertile lowlands of eastern China a Tai identity, which reputedly ended when these Tai were ousted around 700 B.C. and were driven southwards to the regions they occupy at present. Eberhard, for reasons which remain somewhat unclear, considers all low-land rice-growers of early China to belong to a Tai-type of culture. Lung Shun-sheng traces the legend of the divine farmer Shen-nung and upon this evidence declares the Tai and Han peoples to be of one and the same stock. Kachorn Sukhabanij considers it likely that the Tai peoples were part of the Lung-shan culture. After studying various annals Likhit Hoontrakul reconstructs a Tai culture some five thousand years ago in a location north of the Yangtze river. Prince Damrong considers that the whole region from the Yangtze to Laos was inhabited once by the Tai. Seidenfaden thinks the Tai originally lived in Yunnan. Rovit decides that it must have been Szechuan, whilst Li Chi opts for all southern China, except Yunnan and Kweichow.<sup>17</sup>

There are also proponents of a theory that Tai peoples had their home-land in present-day Thailand.<sup>18</sup> Finally there is a group of scholars who

<sup>15</sup> 'The Cradle of the Shan Race', p. li.

<sup>16</sup> W. Credner, *Cultural and Geographical Observations Made in the Tai (Yunnan) Region with Special Regard to the Nan-chao Problem*, translated from the German by E. Seidenfaden, Bangkok: Siam Society, 1935, as quoted by F. M. Lebar (*et al.*) *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 197. See also G. H. Luce 'The Early Syam in Burma's History', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLVI, Pt. 2, 1958, p. 141; Yoshiro Shiratori, 'An Historical Investigation of Ancient Thai', *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochnaises*, NS, Volume XXXIII, 1958, pp. 431-46; M. Blackmore, 'The Ethnological Problems Connected with Nanchao', *Symposium on Historical, Archaeological and Linguistic Studies on Southern China*,

*South-East Asia and the Hong Kong Region* (F. S. Drake, editor), Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967, pp. 59-74; Li Fang Kuei's remarks as reported in B. M. Broman, 'Early Political Institutions of the Thai: Synthesis and Symbiosis', p. 23, and F. W. Mote, 'Problems of Thai Prehistory', *Social Science Review*, Volume II, No. 2, 1964, pp. 100-9.

<sup>17</sup> See A. B. Griswold's critical notes in the 1973 edition of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab's *Monuments of the Buddha in Siam*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, pp. 43-4.

<sup>18</sup> For details see 'The Origin of the Tai Peoples Reconsidered' *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Soon Sangvichien, 'Khon Ban Chuang nai Patcuban' *Adut Ruambotkhaam koon Prawatisat*, Bangkok: Fine Arts University, 1974.

...n that it is likely that the Tai peoples' homeland must be sought in the coastal lowlands of southern China and the Red River Delta. Proposers of such theories include Credner who bases himself upon the type of habitat present-day Tai prefer, the fact that theirs is a rice-growing culture and the fact that they can always be found in the relatively warm lowlands, never on mountainous slopes.<sup>18</sup> Izikowitz also has come to the conclusion that the Tai originally came from river valleys and he specifically mentions the Red River delta where the Tai must have been prior to the coming of the Vietnamese.<sup>19</sup> A similar view appears to underlie Bayard's reconstruction when he places Thai-Kadai-speakers of the fourth and third millennium B.C. in the coastal regions of what is now southern Vietnam and south-east China.<sup>20</sup> Mote, discarding the evidence which led scholars to assume a central or western Chinese origin also prefers a southern coastal location for the Tai. Recently, Chamberlain, summarising linguistic evidence and drawing to some extent upon local Tai legends comes to the conclusion that a Tongkinese location is the place from where the many branches of the Tai language stem.<sup>21</sup> None of these theories and hypotheses, however, have become generally accepted amongst scholars and the debate continues.

The above paragraphs should suffice to demonstrate that the whereabouts of the Tai peoples during the first, second and third millennium B.C. is at present still a matter which has to be decided. There is no agreement amongst scholars as to the location of the Tai during prehistoric times.

Personally, I am inclined to favour the ideas put forward by Credner, Izikowitz, Mote and Chamberlain, and think it likely that the Tai obtained their identity in a relatively warm lowland, in an environment conducive to irrigated rice-growing. The region of Tongkin and coastal Kwangsi province would appear a suitable environment for the type of culture the Tai developed. However, I am rather reluctant to write about the Tai of the second, third or even fourth millennium B.C. The present Tai languages are remarkably similar; they are almost mutually intelligible.<sup>22</sup> Their spread over such a large area of Southeast Asia and their consequent relative isolation from each other must have been fairly recent. If they had not recently sprung from a common stock, they would have been more diversified than they are.<sup>23</sup> The age of 'proto-Tai', the common stock from which all Tai languages developed, has been estimated by Gedney to be not more than two thousand years.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> W. Credner, *Siam, das Land der Tai*, Osnabrück: Zeller, 1966, pp. 178-9.

<sup>19</sup> K. G. Izikowitz, *Over Dimmornas Berg*, as cited by E. Seidenfaden, 'An Appreciation of Colonel Henri Roux's *Quelques minorités ethnique(sic) du Nord-Indochine*', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume XLIII, Pt. 2, 1956, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> D. Bayard, 'North China, South China, South East Asia, or Simply "Far East"?' *Journal of the Hong Kong Archaeological Society*, Volume VI, 1975, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> J. R. Chamberlain, 'A New Look at the History and Classification of the Tai Languages', in *Studies in Tai Linguistics in Honor of William J. Gedney* (J. G. Harris and

J. R. Chamberlain editors), Bangkok: Central Institute of English Language, 1975, pp. 49-66.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Bancop Phanithumethaa *Kao Le Maan Tai*, Bangkok: Samarakom Phaasaai lae Nangsuu 1961, where a Thai linguist reports on conversations with Khamti, Khamyang and Phakey peoples. Similar remarks can be found in 'Saarnaat', *Yiam Thai Aahom, Saaluaad khoong rao*, Bangkok: Sathianphaap, 1954.

<sup>23</sup> R. Burling, *Hill Farms and Padi Fields, Life in Mainland Southeast Asia*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> W. Gedney, unpublished paper, cited by J. R. Chamberlain, 'A New Look', p. 58.

To summarize the argument thus far: there are a multitude of conflict-theories regarding the possible whereabouts of the Tai during the first, second, third and even fourth millennium B.C. In general, these are highly speculative and often based upon little more than a hunch. Of all these ideas the popular notion that many millenia ago the Tai came from a region in present-day Mongolia seems the most unlikely. There is simply insufficient evidence to say where the Tai were during such early times.

The high degree of similarity of all Tai languages, which may be taken to indicate that the Tai formed a much more homogeneous group at the beginning of our era than at present, puts the quest for the origin of the Tai in a completely different perspective. If a 'Proto-Tai' culture existed two thousand years ago, it is possible that Tai had not yet come into being during the fourth, third and second millennium B.C. In other words, if the language which gave rise to all present-day existing Tai tongues existed two thousand years ago, there need not necessarily be Tai deeper in the past. Languages are not *sui generis*, they continually develop through internal and external pressures. Therefore it is wiser to begin the story of the origin of the Tai some two thousand years ago, at the beginning of our present era.

Lacking evidence other than the estimates given by linguists, it is here proposed to distinguish three periods in the earliest history of the Tai peoples (see Table I). This periodization is only tentative and may well have to be adjusted in the future when new evidence is brought forward. The earliest, 'Proto-Tai' is placed roughly in the Han period, for as will be seen, this is the time when the first fairly reliable mentions of Tai peoples are found. The term 'Archaic Tai' is given to the time from the end of the

TABLE I  
TENTATIVE PERIODIZATION OF THE EARLIEST TAI

Period	Designation
Approximately 200 B.C.-200 A.D.	Proto-Tai
Approximately 300 A.D.-700 A.D.	Archaic Tai
Approximately 700 A.D.-1000 A.D.	Ancient Tai

Han period to approximately 700 A.D. The interval from 700 A.D. until the end of the first millennium is called the time of the "Ancient Tai", just before their main spreading over most of the regions they inhabit at present.<sup>5</sup>

In the Proto-Tai period there is a written record which could refer to the Tai. It concerns a remark in the Imperial Annals of Annam, which records the rebellion of the Cheng (Trung) sisters. The Chinese troops which were sent to put down this disturbance in the year 42 A.D. are reported to have met with a tribe of people called 'Tay do'. These

<sup>5</sup> Brown, analysing the changes in 'southwestern' Tai languages uses the term Ancient Thai for approximately the eighth century. (J. M. Brown, *From Ancient Thai to Modern Dialects*, Bangkok: Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1975).

have been identified with the Red Tai, who are still known by that name.<sup>28</sup> The place where these Tai speakers were found was, according to the commentary to the annals, in what is later known as the province of Thanh Hoa, a delta at the southern end of Tongkin.

Also during Han times there is reference to the Ai-lao peoples but, as we will see, this need not help us in our search for Tai. The first record of the Ai-lao is in the Hou-Han-Shu.<sup>27</sup> This tribe reputedly lived at the Chiang-han river, which commentators have taken to refer to upper reaches of the Mekong river. In the year 47 A.D. the Ai-lao king reputedly attacked an aboriginal tribe near the Chinese border. Not long afterwards, in 51 A.D., the Ai-lao began to send tribute to the Chinese court. The Chinese accepted the submission of the Ai-lao and created two new prefectures, Ai-lao and Po-nan, in the upper Mekong river area, almost as far north as lake Tali.<sup>28</sup>

In the literature, the Ai-lao people often are tentatively described as Tai, but this identification does not appear to be very firmly based. The reasons for the tentative label Tai are two-fold. In the first place the Ai-lao are described in the Hou-Han-Shu as tattooed, and this trait is sometimes taken to be 'typically Tai'. However, the actual description of the Ai-lao says 'All the people belong at to this tribal stock etc., and paint their bodies with dragon-like designs...<sup>20</sup> The type of body adornment thus described is so vague as to be of little help in making an ethnic identification. The second consideration which has led some scholars<sup>21</sup> to surmise that the Ai-lao are Tai is the claim by the ruling tribe of Nanchao that their ancestors were Ai-lao.<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, the idea that the Nanchao state (629-1252) was ruled by Tai speaking peoples has been discredited and therefore the evidence does not lead us to believe that the Ai-lao are Tai.

Indeed, all the evidence available on the Ai-lao points in a different direction. The literary sources of the *Ai-lao* come from the tribes, with no fixed abodes and no chiefs.<sup>32</sup> We have learned to regard the Proto-Tai as settled agricultural peoples and possessing a stratified society. The location of the *Ai-lao* prefecture seems to indicate a semi-nomadic point to a wet-rice growing community for the terrain has no relatively warm, broad valleys. Furthermore, the *Hou-Han-Shu* mentions that the *Ai-lao* people have pierced nostrils and hanging ears. Common people have their ears e-taaled to their shoulders so that they hang three inches below that level. Again, such details do not suggest Tai peoples, for nose-piercing and hanging ears are typical of the *Tai* customs as we shall see later in this book.

<sup>22</sup> A. Des Michels, *Les annales impériales de l' Annam*, Paris: Leroux, 1892, pp. 60-2 and P. Lefèvre-Pontalis, 'L'invasion Thaïe en Indochine', *T'oung Pao*, Volume VIII, 1897, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> W. Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China*, Leiden: Brill, 1968, p. 262 and p. 271.

H. Böhlstein, *The Restoration of the Han Dynasty, Volume III, The People*. Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, No. 39, Stockholm, 1967, p. 77 and map 12.

► I thank Dr R. R. C. de Crespigny of the Chinese Department at the Australian National University for making available the relevant translations.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, P. Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai kingdoms*, Gauhati: Department of Publications, 1968, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> BieLENSTEIN, *The Restoration*, p. 77.

Y. Hervouet, *Un poète de cour sous les Han*; *Sseu-Ma Siang-Jou*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises, Vol. XIX, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964, pp. 117-8.

For several centuries after the Han period there is no information on the Tai. If our first information was correct and the Tai were in the Tongkin region in the first century A.D. we may quite safely surmise that they were living in Tongkin and settling in the upper valleys of this region where they still form the bulk of the population. Natural increase in the population would lead them via the river valleys and lower regions of what is now southern Kwangsi province into regions now under firm Chinese control. Historians of the Kwangsi Institute of Nationalities at Nanning can trace the establishment of the Chuang peoples back with certainty to the eighth century A.D. The Chuang, whose numbers have been estimated as twelve million people are the most numerous Tíi minority group in present-day China. During the eighth century according to these historians the Chuang peoples rebelled twice against the Chinese overlords. Indeed, there are signs that Tai peoples moved during the eighth century as far north as the Si Kiang basin, and that at the end of that century they intruded into Ho-nan province.<sup>11</sup> Moreover the Museum of the Kwangsi Institute for Nationalities has several gravestone rubbings which identify people of Chuang descent, and these gravestones also go back as far as the eighth century. Unlike some of the vague Chinese records which lump various ethnic groups together under a label 'Southern Barbarians', these gravestones use specific characters for various ethnic groups and the Chuang people are clearly distinguished by a character which is basically the same as that used at present. For the Sung period there is a record of another Chuang rebellion, this time in the eleventh century. In 1052 the Chuang threw off Chinese overlordship in what is now southwest Kwangsi, but a Sung expedition soon quelled the uprising and ensured Chinese control.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of the idea, often put forward, that the Tai peoples moved southwards from China to Southeast Asia, it is here proposed that exactly the reverse took place. This northward expansion may well have been a gradual process up to the eighth century and the period here assigned the label Archaic Tai may well have been one during which Chinese influences were strong. There are signs of Tai borrowings from the Chinese during this period. The sixty-year cycle, for example, appears to have been borrowed not later than the sixth century A.D.<sup>13</sup> This may also have been the time when the Tai peoples adopted the peculiar 'southern Chinese' — sounding kin numeratives described in the following chapter. It would be an interesting hypothesis to account for other 'Chinese' features of early Tai culture, such as the appointment of a chief's left-hand and right-hand main adviser<sup>14</sup> by surmising manifold borrowings between the end of the Han period and the eighth century A.D. At the same time it is quite possible that the Archaic Tai peoples contributed to the southern Chinese culture.

<sup>11</sup> T. Guignard, 'Note historique et ethnographique sur le Laos et les Thay', *Revue Indochinoise*, Volume I, 1904, p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> I thank Ms A. Chang and Dr A. Diller of the Australian National University, who visited Nanning in December 1978, for this information.

<sup>13</sup> Li Fang-Kuei, 'Some Old Chinese

Loan Words in the Tai Languages', *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 8, 1944-5, pp. 333-42.

<sup>14</sup> The Tai appear to have adopted this feature quite early in their history, as witnessed by the fact that it appears amongst three distinct, separate groups and that in each case the feature can be traced back

For a relevant rapid series of events. There is as yet no firm evidence of Tai peoples in the region now occupied by Laos, Thailand and Burma before the eighth century. The first references appear to be in Cham inscriptions and in the records of Pagan.<sup>40</sup> There is still scope for historians to study Tai history in the eighth century.

There exist many ingenious written sources, both oral tradition routes as well as with quasi-mythological genealogies. In at least one instance such a Tai written source claims to go back as far as the seventh century A.D.<sup>41</sup> It would be a difficult, but challenging task to compare such records with as yet largely unpublished old documents of groups such as the Lue and the Black Tai. The one published account of ancient legends of the latter group indicates that such a comparison might yield interesting results.<sup>42</sup>

It is commonly thought that the Tai established themselves gradually in mainland Southeast Asia by 'infiltration', a slow process of filling up the region with Tai migrants, rather than by conquest.<sup>43</sup> Broman, however, has considered many of the theories on the basic character of the Tai incursions and has come to the conclusion that these were probably much more forceful. A Tai ruler, accompanied by a band of warriors and their families, would establish himself in a fertile valley and request local populations to recognize him and his followers as overlords or else give battle.<sup>44</sup> Whilst there is but scanty evidence for any theory on this matter, the little there is seems to support Broman's point of view. A careful reading of the available Tai historical legends indicates a journey of conquest rather than a peaceful spreading. For example in a Black Tai legend, the Tai chief Tao-Lo had six sons and gave to the eldest five each a *muang* (town and surrounding district) to administer.

There remained Lan-Chuong, the last-born who, having no land or fields to live on, left to search for a *muang*. He travelled randomly, traversing rivers and scaling mountains. He thus passed the mountain Khao-Vai, went through the forests, in the direction of the rock To, and per boat went up the river Bu, reached the mountain Khao-Fa and, still proceeding at random, went farther to Muang-La.<sup>45</sup>

Finally he establishes himself at Muang Muoi and marries the chief's daughter. His father-in-law gave him Cheng Li to live in and during the

a considerable time. The Ahom people recollect that Sukapha appointed early in the thirteenth century the Bar Gohain and the Burha Gohain. In early Siam there were the left and right chief ministers *argamahasenapati* (H. G. Q. Wales, *Ancient Siamese Government and Administration*, New York: Paragon Reprint, 1965, p. 79 ff.). The Black Tai also know of the institution of a left and right chief advisor (H. Roux, 'Quelques minorités ethniques du Nord-Indochine', *France-Asie*, Jan-Feb., 1954, p. 393.)

<sup>40</sup> G. Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, (W. F. Vella, editor) translated by S. Brown Cowling, Canberra: ANU Press, 1968, p. 140

<sup>41</sup> Luce, 'The Early Syam in Burma's

History', pp. 59-101. Note especially his remark on p. 59, that the first main entry of Tai peoples into the Indochinese peninsula may have been from the Kwangsi-Upper Tongkin border region, which is in agreement with the ideas put forward here.

<sup>42</sup> S. K. Bhuyan, *Deodhal Asam Buranji*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1962, p. 233.

<sup>43</sup> H. Roux, 'Quelques minorités ethniques du Nord-Indochine', pp. 375-85.

<sup>44</sup> Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, p. 189.

<sup>45</sup> Broman 'Early Political Institutions of That', pp. 18-21.

<sup>46</sup> Roux, 'Quelques minorités ethniques du Nord-Indochine', p. 378.

feast of his installation Lan-Chuong kills the chief. The population, horrified by this crime, fled to China and the Tai prince is forced to continue his search. Various *muangs* which he encounters do not please him but eventually he finds a big round valley, densely populated with rice fields on both sides. Here he marries and becomes chief.<sup>44</sup> From this episode in an indigenous account, and many other passages in the same source we can derive a picture of the manner in which Tai scions obtained places to govern by the native marriage with local chieftains' daughters and by conquest.

Also in the ancient Ahom records we find that the travels of the Tai peoples were by no means a peaceful intrusion. The great King Sukapha, who at the beginning of the thirteenth century led a group of Tai peoples from a region, presently situated in upper Burma, to one in upper Assam, had to fight his way 'by giving battles to the inhabitants of different places'.<sup>45</sup> In addition it can be noticed that whenever the Tai peoples established themselves in a region of mainland Southeast Asia where there was already a long-established written tradition, such as the Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya, there is no sign of a gradual infiltration. For example, there is no evidence of a compromise between Mon rulers and Tai. The Mon inscriptions cease abruptly and from then on the Tai culture appears to have taken over.

Between the eleventh and the beginning of the thirteenth century the Tai peoples seem to have spread over the valleys of what is now upper Laos and upper Burma and they seem poised at the beginning of the thirteenth century at the mouth of the valleys of what is now upper Burma, Assam and northern Thailand. They went on invading these fertile rice lands in the first half of the thirteenth century. This is well before the incursions of Kublai Khan in the region, and in contrast with what is sometimes proclaimed, I argue that the Tai spreading over mainland Southeast Asia must be seen as quite separate from the Chinese interference in the region during the late thirteenth century. Kublai Khan did not drive the Tai peoples like a wave in front of his armies, the Tai were firmly entrenched long before the Mongols took control of Yunnan in 1253. The Yuan dynasty's attacks upon Burma and Siam did play a role in this, temporarily weakened some of the major powers in the region, giving the Tai peoples a chance to strengthen their hold on many of the valleys they had taken, but the Mongols should not be regarded as the ones who forced the Tai peoples into spreading over mainland Southeast Asia.

From the thirteenth century onward, the history of the Tai peoples is quite clear in its broadest outline. Tai chiefs kept their dominant position in the fertile valleys of Tongkin, they established principalities in all the big valleys of what is now northern Laos and slowly expanded southwards along the Mekong river. In the region now called northern Thailand they used the temporary weakening of the Khmer kingdom to push southwards and, with amazing rapidity, they took political control over most of what is now called Thailand, setting up *muangs* by the score. The big valleys of the lower Si Chuen, upper Brawadhy and upper Chindwin remained under the control of the Tai peoples who today still form the dominant group there.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 379-80.

and editor), Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press,

<sup>45</sup> *Ahom Burmali* (G. C. Barua, translator 1930, p. 25.

The Tai peoples appear thus to have reached the positions where they can be found today by the end of the thirteenth century. They now occupy most of the lowlands of a region which can be described as a broadly Y-shaped figure, one top end of which begins in the Brahmaputra valley, the other in southern Kwangsi, meeting in northern Thailand and stretching down into the Malay Peninsula. The Tai people's occupation of this area is, however, by no means uniform. The valleys in upper Laos and upper Burma are interspersed with big stretches of rough and mountainous terrain. Indeed, it may be argued that the mountain ridges of northern Laos and the Annam Cordillera have served to prevent an earlier Tai 'invasion', which only occurred because further intrusions into China were blocked. The consequent wide spread of Tai peoples across many mountainous stretches resulted in their effective dispersion. There was no regular contact possible between the Tai in Kwangsi and those in the upper river valleys of Tongkin; the Tai in the Laotian principalities could not easily communicate with their relatives in the valleys of the upper Chindwin; the Tai in Siam had little or nothing to do with those living in the upper Irrawaddy, and the Tai of the Brahmaputra valley found themselves also cut off from the many Tai peoples stretched over mainland Southeast Asia.

To recapitulate, there appears to have occurred a relatively sudden spread of the Tai, and a subsequent isolation of individual groups, causing the development of a large number of separate ethnicities and speech varieties. For seven hundred years there has been little to remind the Ahom people of their Tai ancestry, the Shans developed their own dialect, and so did the Lue, Nua, Yuan, Lao, Siamese and others. For the ethnohistorian this situation is a veritable 'treasure trove', whereby peoples of a common origin have been scattered in various directions, some of them exposed to the world at large, others existing in almost total isolation. The coming chapters of this book represent an effort to exploit this situation in one respect. For the whole range of Tai peoples cultural details will be compared in the hope of establishing aspects of the Ancient Tai culture at the end of the first millennium A.D., when the Tai peoples still formed a relatively homogeneous group, probably living mainly in Tongkin and Kwangsi.

## SECTION 2: THE AHOM PEOPLES

In history books dealing with Southeast Asia there is seldom a mention of what happened to those Tai who, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, invaded the Brahmaputra valley. In this section their quite remarkable conquest and eventual decline is briefly related.<sup>6</sup> The developments which led to Tai political dominance of Assam were much more gradual than those which led the Tai peoples into the Chao Phraya delta. Whilst in the Chao Phraya delta much of the region which now constitutes Thailand was by the end of the thirteenth century under Sukhothai dominion, the first groups of Tai speakers in Assam had at that time established themselves only a 'beach-head' in the upper end of the Brahmaputra valley.

<sup>6</sup> There are many accounts of the Ahom's third, revised edition, Calcutta: United rule in Assam. The standard work is still Commercial Press, 1963. Sir Edward Gait's *A History of Assam*.

In 125 AD a fairly large number of Tai peoples, reportedly eight or nine thousand<sup>17</sup> led under the leadership of Sukapha,<sup>18</sup> set out from their villages in what is now upper Burma and wandered about searching for a home of their own. They moved over the Patkai hills which form the watershed between the upper tributaries of the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra rivers. There is no doubt that Sukapha was Tai and that he came from a region, now called upper Burma, for his descendants have preserved old written documents to prove this. Sukapha had to battle through Naga territory in order to reach the Assamese lowlands and in the fertile lower regions he had to subdue local tribes such as the Moranis. Sukapha retained his foothold and his success may have caused other Tai groups to follow his lead and strengthen his position.

Sukapha became the founder of a local dynasty. After his death his son Suteuphi (1268-81) succeeded him and then followed Subimpha and Sukhangpha respectively. Sukapha's grandson and great grandson. Under Sukhangpha (1293-1332) a long war broke out between the Tai and Kamata, the neighbouring ruler of Kamatesvar. The conflict was finally solved by a truce, sealed by the marriage of Sakhangpha and Rajani, Kamata's daughter. After Sukhangpha's death, the fourth generation of Ahom rulers came to power by the accession of Sukhrampi and then his younger brother Sutupha. According to Gait's account of this early Ahom history, Sukapha's dynasty continued, after Sutupha was treacherously killed by the king of the Chativas, with the accession of yet another brother of Sukhangpha, Taokhamthi.<sup>19</sup> However, it appears somewhat doubtful whether the direct line was thus continued. Since Sakhangpha, allegedly Taokhamthi's father had died in 1332, it would have made Taokhamthi a man of considerable age when he succeeded the throne in 1380. There are signs that with Taokhamthi Sukapha's dynasty had come to an end. In the first place there was an interregnum of four years between Sutupha and Taokhamthi. Secondly his name and title differ from the other kings. Thirdly, there are indications in the chronicles that he was not accepted as a suitable ruler and that he was assassinated in 1389.

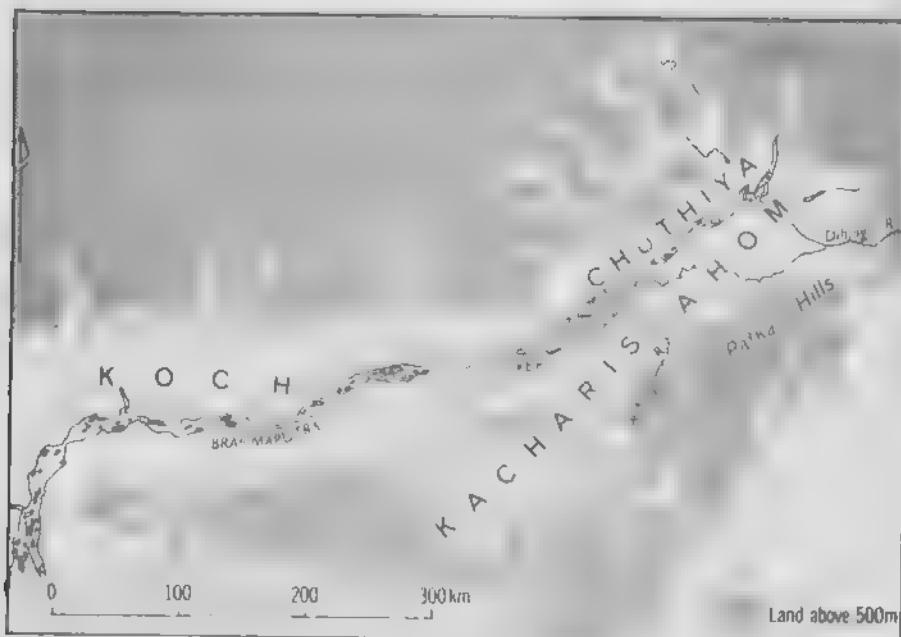
The next ruler of the Ahoms was selected after nine years during which the country was ruled by councillors and nobles. A young man of noble appearance impressed one of the councillors who was traveling on the other side of the Lohit river and he proposed that this young man become the new king. In 1397 the new king was crowned and he took the name of Sudangpha. He took into the court also the members of the Brahmin family amongst whom he had been brought up. This is the first sign of Brahmanical influence in the Ahom tradition. Through most of the fifteenth century there is not much recorded of Ahom history. The chronicles mention little more than the names of kings and the number of years they ruled. An interesting item of information is the account of a full solar eclipse in 1487.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the fifteenth century war broke out with the Kacharis. The Kacharis trapped the Ahom army and routed them, causing the Ahom king to retreat over the Dikho river with the loss of a hundred and twenty warriors. The Ahoms had to sue for peace and sent a high-ranking girl,

<sup>17</sup> *Ahom Buranji*, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ahom Buranji*, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 82-83.



MAP 2 : The Position of the Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley in the 15th-16th Century A.D.

two elephants and twelve attendants as a token of their submission. The Ahom king was murdered three years later by some of his own subjects. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century the Ahom kingdom appears to have been a relatively small one in Assam, occupying the region south of the Brahmaputra and east of the Dikho river. It is during the long reign of Suhungmung (1497-1539) that the Ahom rule was greatly expanded. After prolonged battles with the Chutiyas and the Kacharis the Ahom peoples virtually doubled their territory, consolidating their military victories by appointing Ahom officials in various settlements previously ruled by other ethnic groups. The beginning of the sixteenth century also saw skirmishes with the Muslim rulers who held power further down in the Brahmaputra valley. From these contacts with the Muslims the Ahoms learned the use of fire arms. The enlargement of the kingdom resulted in the adoption of the Hindu calendar in favour of the Tai sixty-year cycle which formed part of the Arcac Tai tradition the Ahom had carried from Southeast Asia.<sup>60</sup> There is also evidence of a growing influence of Brahmanism and a spreading Vaisnavism in Ahom society.<sup>61</sup>

Suhungmung's son Saklenmung who succeeded to the throne (after having bribed some people to assassinate his father) consolidated the enlarged Ahom kingdom by moving his capital to Gargaon, not far from the present town of Sibsagar, where parts of the Ahom palaces are still pre-

<sup>60</sup> For a description of the Ahom version of this sixty-year cycle see B. Barua and N. N. Deodhai Phukan, *Ahom Lexicon*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1964, pp. 190-3 and

J. N. Phukan, 'A Note on Lak-ni' *Journal of the University of Gauhati*, Volume XX (Arts), 1969, pp. 67-73.

<sup>61</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 99.

several Tai rulers introduced an innovation to the Ahoms by having the first coins struck. These coins carry legends in Ahom language and script and the names of Tai rulers had already been introduced; he had the year recorded in the longer 160-year cycle. It is clear from the devotional phrase on these coins, which reads: 'I, the king, worship Tara', that Indian religion was accepted in the court.<sup>61</sup> In 1546 the country was invaded by a large Koch army and thus the Ahom people were placed in direct confrontation with the major political power in Assam. At first the Ahoms were defeated repeatedly, but eventually Suklenmung managed to rout the Koch forces and routed them, thus regaining all he had lost before.

The second half of the sixteenth century saw the long reign of Sukhampha (1552-1603). In this period the Koch kings invaded Ahom territory again, and this time the Ahom army was soundly defeated. Early 1563 the capital Gauri was taken by the Koch commander and in the resulting negotiations the Ahoms had to agree to acknowledge Koch suzerainty. Soon however the Ahoms reassessed themselves and in 1570 they defeated a Koch army. During this period Vaishnavism spread further through the proselytizing efforts of disciples of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Bhattacharya.<sup>62</sup>

The history of the Ahoms during the seventeenth century is dominated by conflicts with the Muslims. At first, under the last ruler of Sisnapha (better known as Pratap Singh, 1603-1643), the Ahom people greatly extended their influence, for the first time occupying the whole region now known as Nowrangpur district. Pratap Singh appears to have been a capable administrator who reorganized the Ahom bureaucracy, who had a census taken and who caused the less populated border districts to be developed by families whom he could trust. Huge earthen walls were erected as defense against enemy forces. Fortresses were built and the army was strengthened until there were a thousand elephants in the king's name. Pratap Singh seems to have had little regard for the old Tai customs and beliefs. The coins struck in his reign do not bear Ahom legends, they all carry Sanskrit inscriptions and script.<sup>63</sup> Under the king's orders Siva temples were erected and grants of land were made for the maintenance of Brahmins and Hindu temples. Yet, according to Gori, the Ahom language continued to be the court language. Pratap Singh's sons ruled four years each and then follows the reign of Sutanati (Jayadhvaj Singh, 1648-1663), who used a period of disension amongst the Muslim princes in lower Assam to extend the Ahom kingdom even further. In 1658 he defeated the Koch armies and saw himself ruler of the whole of the Brahmaputra valley. The western part of the valley was traditionally under Muslim suzerainty and it was not long before Mir Jumla demanded that the Ahoms retreat to their own tracts. Jayadhvaj Singh appears to have underestimated the Muslim armies' strength or he did not fully expect the anticipated conflict. In 1662 Mir Jumla's army marched along the both banks of the Brahmaputra and a fleet kept pace with the force. He took Gauhuri and

<sup>61</sup> J. Allan, 'The Coinage of Assam', Barua, *History of Assamese Literature*, New *Numismatic Chronicle*, Volume 9 (Fourth Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1964, p. 18 ff. Series), 1909, pp. 300-31.

<sup>62</sup> For a short overview of the impact of Sankaradeva and his followers, see B. K.

<sup>63</sup> Allan, 'The Coinage of Assam', p. 301.

<sup>64</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 123-4.

rapidly progressed into Ahom territory, never letting the retreating Ahom troops regain their confidence, sacking various fortified places and finally thrusting forward to take Gareaon, the Ahom capital itself. Mir Jumla and his army had to stay throughout the rainy season in Gareaon, besieged by the Ahom whose morale had risen considerably when the series of disasters appeared to have come to an end. Protracted negotiations resulted in a treaty, in which the Ahom paid a considerable indemnity, handed over hostages, ceded the western part of the Brahmaputra valley to the Delhi emperor and agreed to supply twenty elephants yearly. Under Jayadhwaj Singh's successor Chakradhvaj Singh (1663-1669) the indemnity payments were stopped, thus provoking new hostilities with the Muslims. The first skirmishes ended with a resounding success on the part of the Ahom troops who recaptured Gauhati. A huge Muslim army was sent up during the dry season of 1668-9 and a protracted warfare ensued which ended with an Ahom victory. The decade after Chakradhvaj Singh's death is marked by a series of court intrigues, and seven different rulers rapidly followed each other to the grave, none of them having had a natural death.<sup>6</sup> A more balanced period began with Gadadhar Singh (1681-1696), who finally settled the disputed border problems by accepting the Manas River, between present day Goalpara and Kamrup districts, as the boundary between the Muslim sphere of influence and that of the Ahom. Gadadhar Singh was a Hindu. His reign was marked by several innovations. He ordered the whole country surveyed using methods he had learnt from the Muslims. His son Rudra Singh (1696-1714) is mainly known for establishing international contacts. He sent envoys to surrounding regions and adopted what he thought best from abroad. The culture of Bengal appears to have become the model for the intellectual elite of this period. Under his son Sib Singh (1714-1744) Hinduism appears to have substantially supplanted the original Tai religion.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Gaurinath Singh (1780-1795), an ineffectual and cruel ruler left quite a bad impression upon the British, who felt obliged to send troops to restore order. This laid the groundwork for the later complete annexation of Assam.<sup>7</sup> During Gaurinath Singh's reign, part of upper Assam was taken by a group of Khants who, according to Gauhati, had crossed the Patkai hills and reached just north of there some two or three years earlier. It is interesting to note that, although the Khants were regarded as tributaries of the Ahom rulers as friends and compatriots, they were persecuted so much by the end of the eighteenth century that they had lost their Tai identity.

Gauhati speaking of the early nineteenth century, clearly noted the trend, whereby the Ahoms slowly were incorporated in the general Assamese Hindu culture. In Gauhati's eye this constituted a lamentable

<sup>6</sup> These episodes are described at length in S. K. Bhuyan, *Lachit Barphukan and His Times*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1947 and *Atan Buragohain and His Times*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1957.

<sup>7</sup> For details, see S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1771-1826*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian

Studies, 1949; H. K. Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, 1826-1858*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1963; *Problem of the Hill Tribes North-East Frontier 1822-42* Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1970, pp. 149-51, and R. M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam, (1824-1854)*, Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, 1975.

change, whereby the Ahom meekly accepted being relegated to the lowest place in the Hindu hierarchy and came to be regarded as a degraded class of people. This process (of deterioration)

has gone on steadily, and no one, looking at an average Ahom of the present day, would suspect him of being the descendant of a race of conquerors who, though small in number, gradually extended their rule over the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, and successfully resisted the assaults of the Mughals, even when the latter were at the zenith of their power.<sup>58</sup>

This view is not subscribed to in this book. Rather than a gradual slide into subjugation, the Hinduization of the Ahom peoples appears to have been the result of a long drawn-out course which was by no means a one-way process. The Ahom rulers and their courts readily and sometimes eagerly adopted aspects of the Assamese culture and this process goes back at least as far as the end of the fourteenth century. Whilst they extended their rule over more and more Assamese territory, the influence of the ancient Assamese culture increased. The Ahom people learnt the local *lingua franca* and by the eighteenth century they had adopted so many Assamese customs that at least culturally they seem to have ceased being Tai. This process is not one of subjugation, but rather one of absorption. By accepting the Hindu ritual hierarchy, many Ahom people found themselves ritually subjected to the command of the Brahmins. At the same time it could be remarked that the caste system is not very rigidly applied in Assam and this may well be a result of the impact of the Tai world view upon the Assamese culture. As for Gait's assertion that the Ahom have become a degraded class of people, even a casual survey of the present day leading Assamese circles reveals that people who can trace Ahom descent are well represented. They can be found in top positions of the civil service, amongst poets, university lecturers and lawyers. As for the farmers who can trace Ahom descent, generally they are not worse off than farmers who regard themselves 'purely' Assamese.

There are other historians who are of the opinion that the Ahom people adopted Hinduism as part of a deliberate policy. According to this view, the Ahom kings, considered themselves hopelessly outnumbered by the Hindus and decided to adopt Hindu customs in order to be able to govern effectively.<sup>59</sup> There appears little or no evidence to support this view, and until such evidence is produced the process of Hinduization can better be seen as a gradual assimilation.

The blend between Ahom and Assamese has become so complete that nowadays people of Ahom descent can often be culturally identified only by a few "antiquated" family customs. These practices are of great interest to the ethnohistorian and a few will be discussed later in this book. At the same time, such Tai 'survivals' do not appear to be so numerous as to warrant giving those who practise such archaic ceremonies a separate ethnic label. At present there does not seem to be an Ahom people, instead there are a large number of Assamese who can trace Ahom descent. In 1881 there were almost 180,000 Ahoms, and by 1931 this number had risen to almost 250,000. They live mainly in the Sibsagar and what was formerly

<sup>58</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 189-90.    <sup>59</sup> Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relation*, p. 19.

and the Lakhimpur district, in the heart of what used to be the Ahom kingdom.<sup>60</sup> However, the Ahom culture can only be partly reconstructed from ancient documents. The Ahom language, notwithstanding the valiant efforts of some inspired teachers, is by many regarded as a dead language. Reputedly it has for many years been extinct as a spoken tongue.<sup>61</sup>

### SECTION 3: THE KHAMYANG, PHAKEY AND KHAMTI IN ASSAM

Apart from the people who trace their descent to the Ahom there are many others who can claim to be Tai. It is true many of these have retained much more of their original culture than appear to have more right to such a label than the Ahom. In the old documents, the Assamese Tai (other than Ahom) fall under two headings: the Khamti and the Shan. In 1792 there were almost 4,000 Khamti found mainly in the regions around Sibsagar and Lachitburi, and more than 1,800 fell under the category Shan. The latter lived mainly in the Sibsagar district.<sup>62</sup>

From traveller's accounts it seems, however, that the category Shan covers a variety of Tai groups who consider themselves to be distinct from each other. 'Saarnaat' mentions, apart from the Khamti, five separate Tai groups: the Nora, Khamyang, Aiton, Phakey, and the Turung.<sup>63</sup>

According to the oral history as recorded during an interview with a Khamyang elder, the Khamyang tribe has been in Assam for many centuries. When King Sukapha had settled himself in Assam and found the living good, he sent his brother back to the region now known as Burma, on the other side of the Patkai hills to tell the Khamyang about his conquest. As a result, in the later half of the thirteenth century the Khamyang people first set out for Assam. Whilst the legend is impossible to disprove, and whilst it is even likely that Sukapha obtained reinforcements from over the Patkai hills, it is improbable that this reflects the true history of the Khamyang in Assam. All six groups of Tai speakers in Assam distinguish themselves from the Ahom peoples in that they have retained much of their Tai culture. Tracing back local genealogies and checking the history of specific settlements results in an overall picture in which the incursions of the ancestors of these six groups appear to have entered Assam for the first time within the last three hundred years.

The first date of the Khamti occupation of tracts of Assamese territory is that given by Gait, who estimates that they had established themselves some fifty or sixty years before they took Sibya by force in 1794.<sup>64</sup> This would place the Khamti migration to Assam in the 1730s or 1740s. It is not clear how Gait comes to this estimated date. M'Cosh, whose report was published in 1837 writes that the Khamti emigrated from their

<sup>60</sup> *Census of India, 1931, Volume III, Pt. II*, p. 242.  
Assam, Part II, Shillong Assam Government Press, 1932, pp. 268-9 and p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Volume II, Second Edition*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1966, p. 66.

<sup>62</sup> *Census of India, 1931, Volume III,*

<sup>63</sup> *Yiin Tai Ahom*, pp. 462-7. The author spells the name Phakey as 'Faake' but here we have adopted the spelling the local people use themselves.

<sup>64</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 220.

native country in the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy 'some fifty or sixty years ago',<sup>61</sup> which would bring the move to the 1760s at the earliest. The latter date appears more likely, especially when we read that the related Phakey people consider that they came to Assam for the first time in order to escape the ravages of the Burmese armies under Alaungpaya (1752-1760).<sup>62</sup> There is no doubt that Khamti and Phakey peoples were closely allied at the end of the eighteenth century, for they are both mentioned as being involved in the revolt against the Ahom administrator.<sup>63</sup>

When the Burmese were expelled from Assam in the 1820s, there were many refugees. Amongst these were a considerable number of Shans who refused to go back to their own country. They were settled at Singimari. Unfortunately we have no clear idea as to which subdivision of the Shan they belonged. Gait is of the opinion that they are the ancestors of the present-day Nora people who had by that time already abandoned their Tai language in favour of Singpho.<sup>64</sup>

When the British forces assumed control of Assam in 1825, they found the Sadiya region under Khamti control. In all their accounts Khamti peoples appear to take the place of all Tai recent immigrants, for the Phakey are no longer mentioned, though they must have been involved in the subsequent dramatic events. The Khamti chief at first agreed to a treaty with the British. He was not required to pay any tribute, but had to maintain a force of two hundred men who received British arms and ammunition and were trained for four months a year.<sup>65</sup> In the early 1830s they appear to be highly regarded by the British, as witnessed in M'Cosh's report:<sup>66</sup>

They are now a superior race to all their neighbours, they are tall, fair, and handsome, considerably advanced in civilization, and are endowed with no small share of military courage. Their religion is Buddhism; but Hinduism is gaining progress. They are amongst the few tribes who have a written character, and can read and write the Burmese language, and understand it when spoken. Their own language, though written, and in character a good deal resembling the Burmese, is quite different, and closely resembles the original Ahomi. Every boy is taught to read and write it by the priests.

In 1835 there arose a dispute in Sadiya between the old Khamti chief's son, who had just succeeded his father, and another local official regarding a tract of land. The British officer at Sadiya ordered the disputants to submit their case to his judgement and when the Khamti refused the latter found himself deposed and banned from Sadiya. This caused considerable resentment, culminating four years later in a full-scale revolt. Some five or six hundred Khamti warriors attacked the British garrison and killed or wounded eighty, including the political agent, Major White. The Government of India regarded it as a serious incident and troops were despatched to deal with the situation. It lasted until 1843, however, before the Khamti chiefs were apprehended. Some were deported to the western part of the

<sup>61</sup> J. M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, report.

Delhi: Sanskarani Prakashak, 1975, p. 145. <sup>62</sup> Bhuyan, *Inglo-Assamese Relations*, p.

<sup>63</sup> 'Saarnaat', *Yiam Thai Aahom*, p. 466. <sup>64</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 344.

<sup>65</sup> *Ahom Buranji*, p. 364.

<sup>66</sup> M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, pp.

Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, 145-6.

Volume II, pp. 64-5, citing Gait's Census.

district, others were settled above Sadiya town, 'to form a screen between the Assamese and the Mysims' and they were dispersed so that they ceased from that time to be of any political importance.' Grierson reports that many of them returned to their former home, across the Burmese border, and that the remainder were divided into four parties and settled in different parts of the Lakhimpur district. There are still a considerable number of Khamti speakers in the relatively remote northern Lakhimpur region and their presence seems thus to go back to the 1840s. In 1850, a fresh colony of Khamti speakers arrived from Burma and settled in Assam.<sup>70</sup>

The Khamyang Shan groups appear to have taken refuge in Assam at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They crossed the Patkai range, established villages in what are now the Sibsagar and Jorhat districts and from there moved to the Dibrugarh river. The Khamyang villages of Disangpani and Chitrapur were established around the 1860s, and Rohan branched off from Chalapathar in 1919.

With regard to the Aiton, there is a persistent story amongst the Khamyang that the Aiton group migrated to Assam in order to avoid castigation, but at present there is no historical information as to when this is supposed to have taken place. In some documents,<sup>71</sup> they are equated with Duonia people but the Assamese Tai consider this to be untrue. In their eyes the Duonia are local Assamese who were forced by the Burmese to work as slaves in Burma and when they were rescued by the British they had forgotten their native Assamese language, and adopted Singpho.<sup>72</sup>

As for the Turang, this is another group which seems to have lost its original language and adopted Singpho. They possess, however, books in the Tai language.<sup>73</sup>

In general, it appears that various groups of Tai speakers arrived in upper Assam from the second half of the eighteenth century onward. The Burmese occupation of Assam caused further migrations and even after the British troops had taken firm control of upper Assam there were new incursions. Still later, when Burma was added to the Indian empire, there was regular contact between Tai speakers in upper Assam and those in northern Burma. Promising young men would be sent to Burma to enter Buddhist monasteries from where they would return, in some cases after many years' absence.

As far as I am aware, nobody has as yet made an exhaustive study of the various Tai dialects as spoken by Khamyang, Phakey, Khamti, Aiton, Naga and Turang. In the short period available for fieldwork I was able to visit representatives of only three of these groups, namely Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti, and was able to observe that each of these groups recognized that there were dialectical differences between their Tai speech and that of the others. In the assessment of these Tai speakers there are

<sup>70</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 360-1; see also Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company*, pp. 132-3, and especially Lahiri, *The Turang of Assam*, pp. 208-11.

<sup>71</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Volume II, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., see also M. Neog, 'A Buddhist Tai in Assam, the Khamti', in L. Gogoi (ed.), *The Tai Annals* (Chowkhama:

NEFA 1971, p. xviii, and the 'Introduction' in the same work (pp. xxxvii-xi).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>74</sup> Some corroboration can be found in E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Indian Studies, Past and Present, 1960, p. 10.

<sup>75</sup> Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Volume II, p. 65.

at present at least four distinct dialects: Khamyang, Phakey, Khamti and Aiton. I have not found people able to describe Nora or Turung.

With regard to the present-day culture, there is a marked difference between the three groups visited as to their rate of assimilation of Assamese culture. Most of the Khamyang people have adopted the Assamese language in favour of Tai. There is at present only a single Khamyang community where the Khamyang speech is used, and that is the village of Powai Mukh. By comparison the Phakey people appear much more conservative, the Tai language is regularly spoken and Tai culture is evident in the women's traditional dress. From interviews with individual Khamti representatives I gained the impression that the Khamti are probably the most conservative amongst the Tai, but I was unable to verify this impression personally in a Khamti community until later.

The physical appearance of the Tai villages visited during the field-work period reflects to a certain extent the degree of assimilation. The Khamyang villages of Disangpani and Chalapathar are almost Assamese: most of the houses are built on the ground, the floors are of clay and the walls are a bamboo mesh, covered with clay and whitewash. Only here and there is an old house built on stilts, in the manner which is characteristic of the Tai. Only the oldest inhabitants can remember a few Tai words, in all the households visited the Assamese language is the common vernacular. In their dress, the people are indistinguishable from the surrounding Assamese, only a few elderly folk wrap a length of white cotton material around the head, reminding the ethnohistorian of the fact that Tai peoples usually wear turbans. Yet the people are aware of their Tai descent, they belong to clans with Tai names and usually marry other Tai. The third Khamyang village visited was Powai Mukh, which has already been mentioned as being the only community in Assam where Khamyang is still spoken. There are other indications of its relative conservatism. The majority of houses are still built on stilts and most elderly people will wear a piece of cloth wrapped around the head. The Phakey villages of Bor-phakey and Nampikey show distinct Tai features, the houses i.e. on stilts and the women wear their traditional dresses and turban. The Tai language is still very much alive amongst the Phakey.

An institution which further distinguishes the Khamvane, Phakey and Khamti groups from the Assamese rice growers is the Buddhist monastery. There is good reason to believe that they were already Buddhist when they first entered Assam, but subsequent contact with northern Burma has enriched and deepened their adherence to this religion. The monasteries at Disangpani, Chalapathar and Nampikey are well-known centres of Buddhism in which scholarly monks provide not only religious guidance to the surrounding population, but also maintain schools for the rigorous instruction of the coming generation. Even a community as small as Powai Mukh with only a few dozen families to provide support, boasts a monastery of its own.

#### SECTION 4: RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS

Probably it was Tyler who first pointed out that there are many 'archaic' aspects in culture. He called them 'survivals', and advocated the sys-

matic study of them. 'Collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historic knowledge'<sup>77</sup> These ideas were further developed in various ethnological schools. To some evolutionists, such survivals were the means with which to trace an earlier, less developed stage in the history of mankind. To some diffusionists, they demonstrated the spread of customs from local points to regions far removed. The evidence for such theories was at times brought forward in a rather uncritical manner and this is probably the reason why the study of survivals has become discredited and has received but little attention in modern ethnology. Nevertheless, I have become convinced that the study of survivals can be helpful and relevant, not so much as an independent method to establish links between different peoples living in different parts of the globe, but as an aid to deepen historical knowledge of a specific people in a limited region. From the first section of this chapter it must have become clear that the Tai culture will lend itself admirably to the study of 'survivals'. We have noticed how the Tai came to be spread far and wide over areas in southern China, mainland Southeast Asia and Assam and that there is proof of the fact that during the thirteenth century these Tai peoples had reached all the regions where they can be found today. It has also been argued plausibly that a few centuries before that time, approximately at the end of the first millennium A.D., the Tai formed a much more homogeneous group than at present. To this more homogeneous Tai culture we have assigned the label 'Ancient Tai'.

'Survivals' can be found in many aspects of culture. They may be discerned in decoration patterns, in weaving techniques, in traditional dress and in folk tales. Probably the richest store of them can be found in religious ceremonies. The reason why ceremonies are often well suited to the study of 'survivals' lies in the very nature of ceremonies. A ceremonial act gains at least part of its validity through the painstaking reduplication of gestures and utterances which have been handed down from the past. It is particularly in ceremonies that there is the likelihood of encountering ways of dressing and clothing which are no longer fashionable, and paraphernalia are seen which would appear out of place in a different context. By donning a ceremonial robe the officiant demonstrates that he moves out of the ordinary, profane world and that he enters the realm of the magical sacred macrocosm.

The main aim of this book is to try and establish 'survivals' of Tai culture by studying certain areas of folk religion and custom. Subsidiary aims are to introduce aspects of the Assamese Tai peoples' culture to a wider public, to demonstrate how they have maintained some time-honoured ceremonies and to point out areas of interest for future scholars.

The technique adopted for the reconstruction of aspects of the Ancient Tai culture is quite straightforward. First the researcher selects a particular custom or ceremony. Usually he has been guided to a promising aspect of culture through his previous experience in the field or through the reading of relevant ethnographic accounts. It should be mentioned that this researcher has had first-hand fieldwork experience with some of the Tai peoples. Between 1967 and 1971 he spent some seventeen months in a central Thai rural community, and he has had the opportunity to revisit

<sup>77</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, London; John Murray, Volume I, 1929, p. 71.

the village in 1974 and 1977. During this period his research centered upon the folk religion of Thai farmers. Although he had the opportunity of making short excursions to the northern, north-eastern and southeastern parts of Thailand, it was not until December 1978 that he visited the Tai of Assam and collected data which form part of the evidence in this book. During the short time available in Assam, the researcher was already considering ceremonies which appeared likely to contain at least some Ancient Tai characteristics, namely the life-cycle ceremonies.

The second step is to gather all the details on the particular ceremony, not only from personal fieldwork notes but also from a wide range of ethnographic literature. The search through the literature may cover also a variety of historical sources. A fourteenth century Chinese traveller's account of customs in Siam may, for example, prove extremely useful in establishing that a particular custom which exists today was already noticed six hundred years ago. Historical sources often provide evidence for the validity of the assumption that ceremonies are often replete with 'survivals'. Naturally, this does not imply that rituals do not change or that innovation is rare in the ceremonial side of culture. Indeed, the search through the available literature often demonstrates how far the original custom has diversified.

The third step in the establishment of aspects of Ancient Tai culture consists of sifting out and 'neutralizing' apparent recent innovations. A good example in the case of Tai ceremonies is the need to eliminate Buddhist elements, for the Ancient Tai, just like many of the present-day easternmost groups of Tai speakers, were not Buddhist. Sometimes Buddhism has attached itself to an Ancient Tai ritual only in the manner of interpretation, without causing the original ritual activity to change markedly. For example, in his description of Laotian death rites, Thao Nhousy Abhay mentions the custom of placing a silver or gold coin between the deceased's teeth. As to the reason for doing so, it is his belief that this serves

to emphasize that no value should be attached to worldly goods and that of all his past wealth, this small amount placed in his mouth is all death has allowed the deceased to take away with him.<sup>78</sup>

Later in this book Tai funeral customs are discussed in detail and then it will become clear that the placement of a coin in the deceased's mouth is probably an Ancient Tai custom. However, Abhay's interpretation diverges from the reconstructed Ancient Tai meaning in that the Tai at the end of the first millennium appear to have believed that the coin is needed so that the deceased can pay the man who will ferry him across the water to the world of the dead. We may safely dismiss Abhay's interpretation as an innovation under Buddhist influence. The example demonstrates an interesting aspect in the study of ancient customs, namely that form and meaning are not necessarily closely linked; each should be studied separately and each deserves its own treatment. In another place I have pointed out a Thai ritual of which the form appears basically the same as one described almost two thousand years ago, whilst the meaning seems to have become the opposite of the original.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Nhousy Abhay, 'Death and Funeral Rites,' *Kingdom of Laos*, edited by R. de Berval, France-Asie, 1959, p. 145.

Terreinverkenningen in de Culturele Antropologie No. 9, Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1977, pp. 78-80.

<sup>79</sup> B. J. Terwiel, *Buddhisme in de Praktijk*,

Whilst all ceremonies are thus intentionally stripped of their Buddhist aspects, this may leave the readers with a somewhat false impression as to the religion of the Tai peoples of Assam. This study is not intended to provide a balanced picture of the present-day religious practices of the Assamese Tai. If I were to attempt such a work I would have to place Buddhism in the foreground, for all the representatives of the Khamyang, Phakey, and Khamti peoples visited are devout Buddhists. I attended religious services both in the monasteries and at home and have not the slightest doubt that these peoples are sincere Buddhists.

The fourth stage consists of making an inventory of the practices regarding the selected ritual for the whole range of Tai peoples. For the purpose of this inventory each separate Tai group, mentioned as such in Lebar<sup>\*\*</sup> qualifies for a summarised description of the available evidence on the ceremony in question. In this book there has been no attempt to follow Lebar's basic classification into western, central Mekong river, central upland groups, southern and eastern groups. Instead the Tai groups are simply arranged in a line; each group falling into place as we sweep over the map from west to east. The order of the inventory is thus Ahom, Assamese Tai, Shan, Nua, Lue, Yuan, Thai, Tai of southern Thailand, Tai of northeastern Thailand, Lao, Neua, Black Tai, White Tai, Red Tai, Chung Chia, Chuang, Tho and Nung. The adoption of the Lebar classification does not mean that this researcher is fully in agreement with that ordering or that division of Tai peoples, it simply means that this ordering will serve the purpose of the exercise. Eventually, it is hoped, knowledgeable anthropologists and linguists will devise a more realistic inventory of Tai peoples. Until that time we shall have to work with existing conventions.

The inventory stage is an important means with which the anthropologist will become familiar with a particular ritual. If he had not made such an inventory before setting out to gather fieldwork data he would often realise too late that he has missed recording interesting details. Moreover, the inventory exposes the inadequacy of much of the existing accounts. Often we read statements such as: 'Then the local medicine man offers rice and some gifts'. For our purposes it is important to note what kind of rice, was it cooked or uncooked, glutinous or non-glutinous, husked rice or puffed rice, and as for the remark 'other gifts', it is frustrating and almost useless. Only by virtue of the inventory will the researcher realise that even the smallest ceremonial details are worth recording.

The fifth stage consists of the analysis and the determination which aspects (if any) of the ceremony may be regarded as pertaining to Ancient Tai culture. The main criterion for this determination is a wide geographical range of a particular aspect. If a certain custom is only found amongst the White, Black and Red Tai we may not presume it to be a likely Ancient Tai feature. After all, these three groups live in close proximity to each other; they may have developed the particular custom locally or they may have borrowed it from neighbouring non-Tai cultures. In order to qualify for inclusion in the reconstructed Ancient Tai culture the ceremonial detail

<sup>\*\*</sup> Lebar, (et al.), *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, pp. 187-239. The Tai groups at present in Assam: the Khamyang exception is the inclusion of a group: Phakey and Khamti.

must be found amongst Tai groups which may safely be considered as having been separated since the days of the major expansion of the Tai speakers between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries AD. If the same detail is encountered, for example, amongst the Tai of southern Thailand, amongst the Shan in Burma and also amongst some of the Tai in northern Vietnam there is reason to suppose that indeed this is an aspect which needs to be considered when we attempt to reconstruct Ancient Tai culture.

During the analysis the whole range of customs pertaining to a particular ritual are pieced together and sometimes this gives rise to interesting hypotheses regarding the evolution of certain customs. Thus, for example, we will note that during the seventeenth century the Siamese are reported to have placed coins on the deceased's eyes and mouth instead of in the mouth as we will have come to expect in our survey. This item of information opens the possibility that the well-known present-day custom of placing a golden or silver mask over the face of a dead chief evolved from the habit of giving valuables to the deceased.

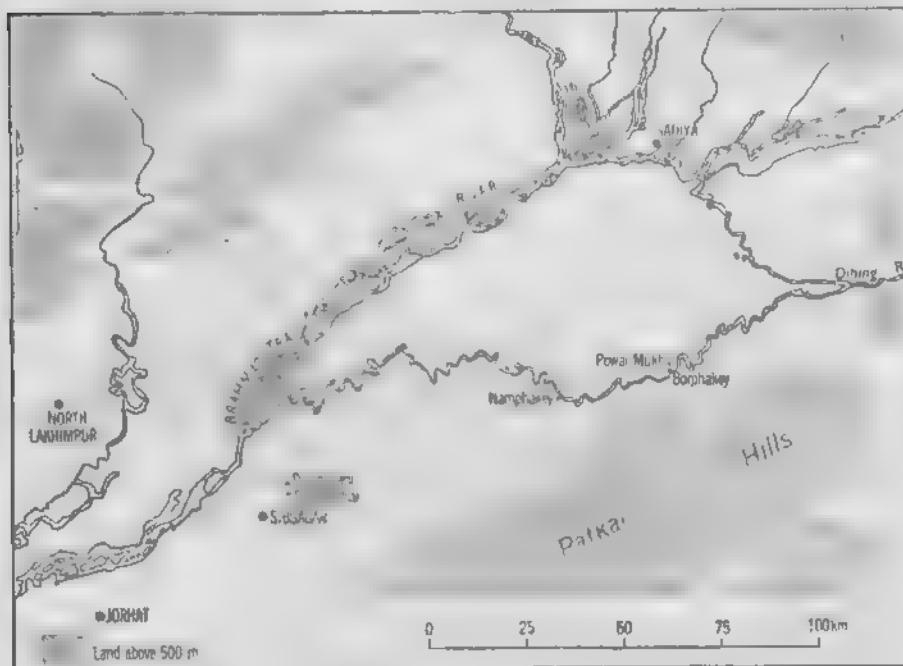
It should be clear from the preceding paragraphs that the comparison of Tai rituals is a painstaking scientific exercise. Before a pronouncement can be made as to the likelihood that a certain ritual detail belongs to the Ancient Tai culture, there must be a judgement regarding the accuracy and the scope of primary source material, an elimination of aspects which appear to be relatively recently introduced and an assessment as to the geographical spread of ceremonial features.

After this first analysis, there remains yet a sixth stage in the method adopted in the book. This consists of an expansion of the search through the literature so as to include a wide spectrum of surrounding cultures. This wider search enables us to determine whether or not the ceremonial details under study have been reported for any of the surrounding cultures. If this is the case, occasionally we may proceed with trying to establish whether the ceremonial detail is shared amongst various neighbouring cultures as part of a common ceremonial, whether the Ancient Tai may have borrowed the aspect from a neighbouring culture or whether the neighbouring culture may have adopted it as a result of having been in contact with the Tai. This sixth stage has not been attempted exhaustively in this book, for no single researcher can make an exhaustive search through all the relevant literature of all the peoples involved. In order to make a few tentative connections between the Tai and surrounding peoples, and to prevent the researcher from perceiving the Tai as living in a 'cultural vacuum', a few standard works on the customs of the Burmese, the Chinese, the Vietnamese and the Cambodians have been scanned, as well as some of the literature regarding the many minority groups of mainland Southeast Asia.

Having explained the basic technique of tracing Ancient Tai features, a few remarks on the fieldwork situation in Assam remain to be made. In the first place it should be mentioned that prior to visiting Assam the researcher had already reacquainted himself with his inventory of certain ceremonies and rituals. He was fully aware of the gaps in the existing ethnographic literature on Tai customs especially with regard to the Tai peoples living north of the twentieth degree latitude. Unfortunately there is at present little chance for social scientists to do extensive fieldwork amongst the Tai speakers in southern China, Vietnam, Laos and Burma.

The time available for fieldwork was extremely short. It was near the end of December 1978 when I had the pleasure of arriving at a Khamyang village and by the beginning of February 1979 I had to be back in Australia. In the intervening period a tour was made setting out from the Ahom village of Patsaku and the Khamyang village of Chacapathar. It led through Naharkutia and Namphakey to Mungferia and Powa Mukti, and from there, across the Dihing river at Borphakay to Marangang in order to interview the Khamti village chief. The tour led us to the town of Dibrugarh and finally back to the twin villages of Cyalapathar and D sangpani. During the whole tour I was accompanied by the Reverend Brinkha Jinavangsa, a young Buddhist monk of Khamyang descent who readily acted as my guide and interpreter. Without his unstinted help the research could not have taken place. Jinavangsa is fluent in Assamese and English, he is a university graduate who has a deep interest in the early history of the Tai peoples and it was fortunate for me that he was willing to spend more than a month of his time travelling with a foreign researcher.

The procedure of gathering information centered around informal interviews. Usually Jinavangsa and myself would stay in a particular village for several days. Since January is the time of the year when the main rice harvest is over, farmers had a good deal of spare time and were eager to see and speak with the visitors in their village. Before long we would be surrounded by people of all ages and after Jinavangsa had introduced the main aims of the research I would ask him to broach one of the topics on my checklist. This list ranged through all the main stages of the life-cycle rituals, from birth customs to death rituals. It was intended



MAP 3 : The Approximate Location of some Assamese Towns and Tai Villages in upper Assam

that some older people, well versed with the local customs would explain the traditional ceremonial details. Ideally such accounts would be commented upon by more than one informant. Every few minutes Jinavangsa would stop and translate into English, giving the informants time to reflect. Those who knew some English could check whether the account was complete. During the breaks in the interviews I could prompt Jinavangsa to check through certain puzzling aspects or to proceed with yet another item on the checklist. These interviews would last from approximately half an hour to several hours and the most difficult passages would be put on tape, to be worked through at later times.

The researcher had hoped that he would be able to converse in Tai, but although he had no difficulty understanding individual words, the Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti languages were too different from central Thai for him to speak complete sentences and he had to be satisfied with relying upon his interpreter.

As a result of interviewing a large number of informants it became possible to draw a picture of the main life-cycle ceremonies of the Khamyang, the Phakey and the Khamti peoples who live in Assam. In this book these rituals are described in some detail, because so far they appear to have escaped the notice of researchers and thus they serve to fill in one of the more glaring gaps in the ethnographic literature. Every description of Assamese Tai ritual is followed by the inventory for all Tai peoples, the analysis and an attempt to place the custom in a wider context. The exercise serves to indicate in what measure the Assamese Tai have retained customs which have been handed over from the past. At the same time the Assamese material occasionally helps to determine whether or not a particular ritual detail belongs to the Ancient Tai culture.

After completion of the tour in December 1978 and January 1979 this first volume of *The Tai of Assam* was written. However, before the book was published, through a grant of the Australian Research Grants Commission, I had the opportunity to visit Assam again in the first three months of 1980. Whilst most of these three months were devoted to collecting material for Volume II, this opportunity was used to fill in some of the gaps apparent in the first work. During 1980 I was not only able to revisit all Tai communities mentioned above, but also I had the great fortune to extend my work. This time I was able also to visit Rohon Shyam Village in Sibsagar District, Tipam Phakey in Dibrugarh District and Borkhamti Gaon at Narayanpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. In addition I was able to visit several Ahom communities and attend some of their ceremonies. More details and full acknowledgements will be given in the projected second volume.

## 2

## RITUALS CONNECTED WITH THE EARLY STAGES OF LIFE

### **Magical means to expedite a birth**

Normally speaking, a birth takes place at home. If the delivery proves difficult the Assamese Tai may resort to practices which have been handed on from the dim past. Thus, the Khamyang people recall that a piece of stone which had been struck by lightning could be used. This stone should be pulverised and the resulting powder put into water and drunk by the woman in labour. An Ahom informant assured that the strongest means of facilitating a delivery is water mixed with powdered rhinoceros-horn, which should be drunk by the expecting lady.

Regarding this belief, some interesting parallels can be drawn with practices recorded for Tai living in other regions of Asia. In central Thailand, a piece of stone or brick that has been hit by lightning is considered laden with beneficial magical power and can be used in the manufacture of amulets.<sup>1</sup> Though there is no record of pulverised stone used in the birth customs of the other Tai groups, the women's drinking of sacralised substances in water is widespread. Phya Anuman Rajadhon, describing birth customs of Thailand, mentions a common remedy for when a child is slow to be born:<sup>2</sup>

Exorcising water (is) sprinkled and rubbed on the body of the woman in labour, and also given to her to drink. This exorcising water is made in many ways, for example, by soaking a charmed amulet in water . . .

The Tai Neua who experience a difficult birth can witness a sorcerer plunging his sword in lustral water, which subsequently is given to the woman to drink.<sup>3</sup>

If these ethnographic data suffice to establish that in principle the Tai consider the consumption of water in which a magically powerful substance has been added a suitable prescription to speed up the delivery, the following report probably comes even closer to the Khamyang practice of grinding up a special stone. Pedersen, describing the customs of some Black Tai who migrated to central Thailand a considerable time ago, records that in order to facilitate the delivery the husband may sharpen his steel axe, collect the grinding water and give it to his wife to drink.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B. J. Terwiel, 'A Model for the Study of Thai Buddhism', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3, 1976, 397. See also *Monks and Magic, An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand*, London: Curzon Press (second, revised edition), 1979, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual in Rural Thailand, Three Studies of*

*That Life and Customs* (translated and edited by W. J. Gedney). New Haven: HRAF Press, 1961, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> A. Bourlet, 'Les Thay', *Anthropos*, Vol. 2, 1907, p. 361.

<sup>4</sup> L. R. Pedersen, 'Aspects of Woman's Life in Rural Thailand', *Folk*, Vol. X, 1968, p. 139.

A second remedy encountered amongst the Assamese Tai has also a typical Tai flavour. If the delivery is difficult, the woman should go to the special house post which is connected with the ancestors. The Khamyang people call this post the *sao phu lang*, but Khanti and Phakey refer to it as *sao phu nam*. It is an upright post, the first one to be raised when a house is built, and can always be found along the eastern side of the house. Usually the eldest living member of the household has his (or her) sleeping quarters near that pole. When the pregnant woman arrives at this most respected house post she should raise her hands in respect and bow down, asking the ancestors to assist with the birth. The woman is not allowed to give birth near that pole, for giving birth is considered a rather unclean event which could easily offend the male ancestors particularly if it took place at that pole.

Again, a very close parallel is found in the account of Black Tai customs by Pedersen:<sup>4</sup>

In especially difficult cases attempts will also be made to summon the aid of the spirits of the ancestors, but this must be undertaken by the woman in labour herself. In the closed room where the spirits of the ancestors dwell she will bend down three times in a deep waj and offer betel and joss sticks. She will inform them that she is about to bring another member of the family into the world and needs their assistance.

It can be noted also that the belief in a house post which is connected with the ancestors is shared by all Tai peoples and this undoubtedly reflects an aspect of a more homogeneous Tai culture from before the time of their spreading over Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup>

A third remedy that was mentioned by the Khamyang provides a most striking example of ritual similarity between the birth customs of the Assamese Tai and those of other Tai groups, for the following custom cannot be seen as an explicit corollary of the needs of the woman in labour; there seems to be no practical value attached to it. If the delivery is very difficult and the woman fears that it could be the result of her having offended her husband, a cup of water is fetched, the husband puts the big toe of his left foot in the water for a while and later the woman drinks this water. This custom must be regarded as a rather humiliating gesture of begging pardon because the feet are normally assiduously kept away from matters which are ready for consumption. Under ordinary circumstances nobody would be willing to drink water which has been in contact with someone's toe.

It is therefore quite remarkable that in an account of birth customs of the Thai, one of the concoctions that can be prepared to expedite the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> Amongst the many sources which refer to the Tai house post we mention: L. Milne, *Shans at Home*, New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1970, pp. 100-1; Krairri Nimmanahaeminda 'Ham Yon, the Magic Testicles', *Essays offered to G. H. Luce by His Colleagues and Friends in Honour of His Seventy-fifth Birthday*, edited by Ba Shin et al. Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1966, Vol. II, pp. 133-148; Sathian Koseet (Phya Anuman Rajadhorn),

*Prapheenii Kao Khong Thal*, Bangkok: Prae Pittaya, 1957, p. 267 ff; B. J. Terwiel, 'Leasing from the Gods (Thailand)', *Anthropos*, Vol. 71, 1976, pp. 254-74; M. Zago, *Rites et cérémonies en milieu bouddhiste lao*, Rome: Gregorian University, *Documenta Missionaria* No. 6, 1972, p. 189 and J. Rispaud, 'Sur une tribu des confins sino-laotiens' *France-Asie*, No. 97, Vol. 10, 1954, p. 751.

process of giving birth and which should be drunk by the woman in labour is water which is poured over the great toe of the husband and caught.<sup>7</sup>

### Cutting the umbilical cord

The next ceremonial aspect of childbirth encountered in the interviews with the Assamese Tai concerns the cutting of the umbilical cord. For all three groups, Khamyang, Phakey and Khanti, it was stressed that the knife had to be made of bamboo. However, there were some variations found with regard to the prescriptions pertaining to the way of procuring the piece of sharp bamboo. The Khamyang people did not specify the place from where the bamboo sliver had to be taken, nor did they report on the manner of preparation. Amongst the Phakey people there were some who would take a sliver from the bamboo framework which upholds the roof, and it was important to cut off the piece with an upward stroke of the bush knife. Another Phakey informant was of the opinion that the knife had to be cut from the bamboo rack (*khuu fa*) which is found suspended from the roof directly above the kitchen fire. This rack is used to dry kitchenware and firewood. A Khanti informant who broached the same subject thought neither method was suitable. According to the latter the piece of sharp bamboo had to be cut out of the door post, taking care to use an upward stroke of the bush knife. If the delivery takes place in a modern house where the door frame is no longer made of bamboo, a piece of bamboo can be held alongside the door post and cut in the prescribed manner.

The custom of severing the umbilical cord with a piece of bamboo is widespread. Almost all authors who describe Tai birth customs mention this aspect.<sup>8</sup> Only two of these accounts provide an indication of the manner in which the bamboo should be obtained. Hanks, reporting from central Thailand noticed that the knife had been sliced out of one of the old bamboo house beams<sup>9</sup> and Pedersen states that the instrument is obtained 'on the spot, of bamboo from the house'.<sup>10</sup>

It seems therefore that the Assamese Tai peoples share this custom with the other Tai. It is, however, by no means certain that they have derived it from an original 'Archaic-Tai' culture, a much more homogeneous culture may even exist before the Tai began spreading over Southeast Asia. The custom of cutting the umbilical cord with bamboo is widespread amongst many other peoples of Southeast Asia. It has also been reported

<sup>7</sup> Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 181; Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, p. 129; J. R. Hanks, *Maternity and Its Rituals in Bong Shan*, Data Paper No. 51, Southeast Asia Program, Ithaca; Cornell University, 1963, p. 46; H. G. Q. Wales, 'Siamese Theory and Ritual Connected with Pregnancy, Birth and Infancy', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol LXIII, 1933, p. 447; Phinyo Cittatham editor and compiler), *Khanophamnam Prapheenii Chaawbaan*, Andap No. 12,

Songkla: Mongkhonkaanphim, n.d. pp. 56-7; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 48; C. Archamhault, 'Birth Rites' in R. de Berval (editor) *Kingdom of Laos*, Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, p. 133; Pedersen, 'Aspects of Woman's Life', pp. 141-2; R. Robert, *Notes sur les Tay Dèng de Lang Chanh*, Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1941, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Hanks, *Maternity*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Pedersen, 'Aspects of Woman's Life', p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, p. 129; Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 214, fn. 18;

as a common Assamese prescription<sup>1</sup> and it is therefore difficult to determine from where the custom originated.

In order to determine with some certainty from where the Assamese Tai derived this custom we have to examine the minute details of ritual prescription for a wide region, such as the direction of the stroke with which the bamboo is obtained and the exact place from where the knife may be taken. Hopefully, future ethnographers will realise the relevance of such detailed reporting.

All we can say at present regarding this custom is that the bamboo knife seems a good example of the principle of 'survivals' in ceremonial setting.<sup>2</sup> Objects which at some time in the past were commonly used but which have since become obsolete, are faithfully preserved in a ritual context. There are many examples of ancient artifacts 'frozen' in ceremonies. A kauri shell, once widely used throughout the region of the Tai and beyond, is still used in some rituals by way of money. In the same manner, the use of the *bonti* lamp in Hindu ritual represents an archaic lighting instrument.

A final remark regarding the cutting of the umbilical cord concerns the fact that the bamboo knife is not the only archaic instrument that can be used. Some Tai use a mollusc shell,<sup>3</sup> others may use a glass sherd.<sup>4</sup> Both these alternatives are, however, mentioned only on one occasion for a single group of Tai, and they may not be taken as normative. At any rate, all Tai share (with other peoples) the general avoidance of using a metal object for cutting the umbilical cord.

### **The afterbirth**

Regarding the disposal of the placenta, no unanimity of opinion was obtained. Some Assamese Tai thought the placenta could simply be buried without ceremony. A Phakey informant reported on the other hand that the proper way of disposal consisted of wrapping the placenta in seven pieces of banana leaf, binding the package with seven bamboo threads and throwing it in the river. If the river was not at hand, however, the package could be buried. None of the informants volunteered information on the best spot where one could dispose of the placenta and in this respect the Assamese Tai appear somewhat at variance with other Tai groups.

The ethnographic reports on the disposal of the afterbirth amongst Tai peoples reveal a considerable variation. For a Shan group it is reported that the placenta is wrapped in banana leaf and buried under the steps of the house.<sup>5</sup> The Lao of the Vientiane region put it in a bamboo tube and

T. K. M. Barua, *The Singphos and their Religion*, Shillong: Government of Arunachal Pradesh, 1977, p. 66. See also S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975, p. 41 and J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, London: Macmillan, 1926, pp. 264-5.

<sup>1</sup> B. Rajkhowa, *Assamese Popular Superstitions and Assamese Demonology* (edited by P. Goswami), Gauhati: Department of

Folklore Research, 1973, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter the idea of 'survivals' was first expounded by Sir Edward Tylor in *Primitive Culture*, p. 71; Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 214, fn. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Rajadhan *Life and Ritual*, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup> Robert, *Notes*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 182.

also bury it under the ladder leading up to the house.<sup>17</sup> The Red Tai of northern Vietnam use the bamboo tube and hang it in a tree,<sup>18</sup> whilst the Tio peoples bury such a bamboo container in a secret place.<sup>19</sup> The peoples of Thailand generally put the afterbirth in a pot and bury it not far from the house. Often it is buried near a tree and if the tree thrives it is a sign that the child also will be strong and healthy.<sup>20</sup>

The Assamese customs regarding the afterbirth thus widen the spectrum of ritual actions even further and no clear pattern can be observed.

### The period of lying in at the fire

All three groups of Assamese Tai reported the custom of lying in near the fire, which they called *musai* or 'being (near) the fire'. After giving birth, a big fire is lit and the mother reclines close by, exposing her abdomen and back. If a woman is strong and healthy, a period of three to four days will suffice, but for weaker persons a longer period may be deemed necessary. On no occasion was a preference for an uneven number of days voiced, nor did people think that certain types of firewood should be avoided.

The custom is ubiquitous amongst the Tai in general.<sup>21</sup> Amongst all groups it is reported to be a custom which is maintained for medicinal purposes, intended to strengthen the mother and to help with the process of 'drying up' the abdomen. Whilst the custom is so widely dispersed amongst the Tai as to make it likely that it formed part of the Tai culture when this was still relatively homogeneous, it should be realised that other Southeast Asian peoples have the same custom, notably the Burmese and the Cambodians. It is possible that the Cambodians at least adopted this custom from the Thai after the thirteenth century, because Chou-ta-kuan, the Chinese envoy who reported on Cambodian birth rituals, does not mention a 'roasting at the fire'<sup>22</sup> and in the seventeenth century, the Burmese were less known for this custom than the Siamese.<sup>23</sup>

### Days of the week

A Phakey informant volunteered an astrological list with information regarding the day of the week on which a child is born (see Table 2). Check-

<sup>17</sup> Archaimbault, 'Birth Rites', p. 133.

103-4; Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, pp. 134-

<sup>18</sup> Robert, *Notes*, p. 41.

46; Wales, 'Siamese Theory', pp. 446-7;

<sup>19</sup> M. Abadie, *Les races du Haut-Tonkin de Phong-Tho à Lang-Son*, Paris: Société d'éditions géographiques, maritimes et coloniales, 1924, p. 48.

S. Piker, 'Changing Child Rearing Practices in Central Thailand', *Contributions to Asian Studies* (edited by S. Piker), Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975, p. 94; K. Matsunaga, 'A Report

<sup>20</sup> Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, p. 132 and pp. 155-9; Hanks, *Maternity*, p. 47; Wales 'Siamese Theory', p. 447; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 49.

on "Rites of Passage" in a Thai Rural Community — Especially a Case in Bang Khem —' in T. Ayabe (editor), *Education and Culture in a Thai Rural Community*, Fukuoka: Kyushu University, 1973, pp. 46-7; Cittatham, *Khanopphaniam*, pp. 50-1;

<sup>21</sup> J. G. Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States*, Rangoon: Government Printing, 1900, Pt. I, Vol. 1, pp. 321-2; Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 33; Hanks, *Maternity*, pp. 49-56; R. Le May, *An Asian Arcady*, Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1926, pp.

Pedersen, 'Aspects of Woman's Life', pp. 147-8; Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 362; Robert, *Notes*, p. 41; and Abadie, *Les races*, p. 48.

TABLE 2  
DAYS OF THE WEEK AND ANIMAL SYMBOL

Day	Name (Phakey language)	Name (translated)
Sunday	Kalung	Garuda bird
Monday	Suu	Tiger
Tuesday	Hangsii	Lion
Wednesday	Chaang	Elephant
Thursday	Nuu	Rat or Mouse
Friday	Pae	Goat
Saturday	Naakha	Dragon/serpent

ing through the literature on the Shan we came across an almost identical horoscope in the Upper Burma Gazetteer, where the seven animals are given as: Garuda, Tiger, Lion, Elephant, Rat, Ox and Sea Dragon, with an eighth added for the eighth stellar phenomenon of Riba the Elephant without tusks.<sup>11</sup> This is an indication of the close relations between Assamese and Burmese Tai, for the lists appear to be based upon the same source.

The Thai of central Thailand have many lists relating birthdays to animal and other symbols.<sup>12</sup> None of these resemble the lists recorded for the Phakey and Burmese Shan. In general, the custom of attaching symbolical value to the day of the week on which one is born must be considered a result of 'Indianisation'. The very idea of the seven-day week with its order of sun, moon and planets was introduced to Southeast Asia with Indian astrological ideas. There is no reason to suppose that the Tai knew the seven-day week during the first millennium.

#### Magical protection of the child

Some of the Assamese Tai infants can be seen wearing a strong thread around the wrist, the upper arm or the neck. The thread has been passed through a miniature metal cylinder, usually between one and two centimetres long and approximately half a centimetre in diameter. The Khamyang call such a cylinder a *lak poi*, and consider it to be an object which is *aang*, or which has a beneficial effect. The concept of *aang* is also used amongst Phakey and Khamti people to describe the working of the cylinder. The *lak poi* is made only upon request for a specific infant. It is considered to be best suited to ward off wasting diseases. A person with a good knowledge of astrology is asked to make the *lak poi*, and he takes a thin

<sup>11</sup> P. Pelliot (translator and editor), *Mémoires sur les coutumes du Cambodge*, Extrait du Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Vol. II, 1902, pp. 30-1.

<sup>12</sup> S. de la Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 66-7.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, Pt. I, Vol. 2, p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Urakhin Wiriyaburana (editor), *Phraommachaat, Chabap Pracambaan Duu Duay Ton'Aeng*, Bangkok: Thammaphakdi, 1967, pp. 97-140.

rectangular piece of copper, silver or even gold, and inscribes on it syllables and symbols which are suitable to the child's day and time of birth.

Undoubtedly, the *lak poi* is related to the Siamese *takrut*, the metal cylinders inscribed with magical letters and figures and worn on a cord on various parts of the body.<sup>27</sup> It seems part of the 'Ta' -ised' traditions which have made a deep impact upon the western and southern groups of Tais and it seems unlikely that it forms part of the Tai tradition of the first millennium. The parallel between Assamese Tai and Siamese indicates again how the Assamese Tai customs are closely linked with those of their ethnic relatives in other countries.

### The winnowing basket ritual

Although the researcher repeatedly asked as an *a propos* during interviews on birth ritual whether a winnowing tray was used, none of the Assamese Tai reported having observed or even heard of a connection between birth ritual and a winnowing tray. This was somewhat surprising to the researcher, for he had come to regard the custom as 'typically' Tai.

In central Thailand, immediately after birth,<sup>28</sup> or in many cases, three days after birth the baby is placed on a shallow round winnowing tray (*kradong*). On the basket are also placed a school book and pencil if the baby is male, a needle and thread if the child is female, as well as the bamboo knife with which the umbilical cord was cut. The nurse bounces the child lightly three times, saying: 'Three days a spirit... on the earth day a human child. Whose child is it?', and a woman who has a pliant character and has raised many children with great success comes forward to claim the child.<sup>29</sup> Immediately afterwards the baby's wrists are tied with white cotton thread in order to strengthen and maintain its vital spirits. Essentially the same ritual has been reported for the Laotians, the Lue, the Black Tai, the Tai Neua and the Red Tai.<sup>30</sup>

To demonstrate the essential similarity of this ritual amongst such widely dispersed groups, here follows a translation of the relevant passage of Robert's work:<sup>31</sup>

After birth the child is washed and then a woman places it on a tray and goes to the big verandah or to the main door. She rocks her charge three times and says: "Little one, if you are the child of a spirit, may he come and kill you; if you are the child of the sky, may the sky take you; if not we will bring you up and you will be our child"....

An interesting variant of this ritual is recorded by Le May, who reports that a few days after birth it is determined by the star on which ancestor may have been reborn in the little child. A ball of boiled rice is suspended from

<sup>27</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, Bangkok: The Social Science Association Press of Thailand, 1968, pp. 276-7; see also Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Hanks, *Maternity*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>29</sup> Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, pl. 133; See also Wales, 'Siamese Theory', p. 446; Matsunaga, "A Report", pp. 40-1; Terwiel,

*Monks and Magic*, pp. 145-6 and Cittatham, *Khanophathamnam*, p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Archaimbault, 'Birth Rites', p. 134; R. Le May (editor), 'The Lu', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 19, 1925, pp. 166-7; Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 362, Robert, *Notes*, p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*

a thread and the oldest woman present holds it up so that the ball hangs free in the air. The names of dead ancestors are called and if the rice begins to turn round at the mention of a certain name it is clear whose spirit has been reborn in the new member of the community. The ball of rice is also requested in the same manner to indicate what type of gift the spirit wishes to receive. On first sight this ritual seems a version of the 'three-days-child-of-the-spirits' ritual which has been adapted to fit a Buddhist framework. At this stage of our research we cannot say with certainty whether the Archaic Tai had a notion of rebirth, but the death ritual reconstructed in Chapter 7 suggests that this was not the case.

Although the Assamese Tai did not know a winnowing basket ritual, the following section describes a ritual which, upon fairly scanty sources, contains many apparently Tai features.

### Introducing the child to the world

The Khamyang groups describe a ritual of taking the baby outside for the first time and introducing it to the elements. In Khamyang language the ritual is called *aw ook can*. The ritual must be held soon after the remnant of the umbilical cord has dried and dropped off, an event which occurs, according to the informants, at least a week after birth. Just in front of the ladder which leads up to the house a number of objects will be arranged, depending upon the child's gender. If the baby is a boy there will be various weapons, such as char and arrow, a sword, a katana, an axe and whatever other old fashioned armament is available, as well as a piece of rock, a book and a pen. If the newborn is a girl, the weapons are omitted and instead people will arrange some baskets, needle and thread. The book and pen can also be placed amongst the objects for the girl. Just at the moment of sunrise the baby will be taken out by an old woman who has been invited to preside this ritual (she is called *ma kuet thi*) and the mother also comes out of the house. With the assistance of the old woman the baby meets the day's first rays of sunlight. Then the child is brought towards the array of objects. If it is a boy, he is helped to touch each of the weapons, the book and the pen, and he is helped for a moment in such a position that his feet touch the lump of rock. If it is a girl, she likewise touches the appropriate objects in front of her. After this, the baby is made to bow down and greet the earth.

The purposes of the ceremony are quite clear. The baby is introduced to the wider world, and for a while exposed to the elements. At the same time it is made to touch objects which symbolise desirable qualities and characteristics. A boy should grow up as strong and hard as a rock, he should be skilful in handling weapons and he should be able to read and write. A girl should grow up to be a person who can prepare food and who excels in weaving and embroidery. It seems unlikely that a book and pen formed originally part of the objects a baby girl should touch for reading and writing were not traditional accomplishments of Tai women. The addition reflects the fact that educational facilities have been extended to both sexes.

<sup>21</sup> Le May, *An Asian Arcady*, pp. 104-5; State 'Journal of the Burma Research Society', see also J. H. Telford, 'Animism in Kengtung' Volume XXVII, Pt. 2, 1937, p. 216.

After returning to the house a small party is held for the women of the village. Each guest is offered a piece of arecanut, wrapped in betel leaf. Some boiled rice and a boiled egg will have been prepared and will be waiting wrapped up in a piece of banana leaf. The woman who presides over the ritual will open the food packet, she then divides the egg in two, exposing the yolk. Whilst good wishes are murmured, bits of this yolk are applied to various parts of the baby's body. Then a piece of white cotton is tied around the infant's wrists. If a boy, the right wrist is tied first, in case of a girl the left side comes first. When the wrists are fastened a short blessing is murmured. All the women present will follow suit and tie bits of cotton. In addition the baby will be offered small presents.

The part of the ritual which takes place in the house is intended to strengthen and bind the child's strength and vitality, which forms the concluding part of the winnowing basket ritual of other groups of Tai, as we have noted above. These activities have a person's vitality are frequently held amongst the Akha, Seta and the Tzim part of a complex set of ideas which will be discussed in the following chapters. In this case we will discuss, compare and analyse only the first part of *aw ook can*.

If we look at the Kheneung ritual from a broad perspective, noting the principles underlying the ritual, it becomes clear that the occasion is after an obvious one for acts such as those described above. Naturally the family members wish to bring the child out into the world at some time or another, and it can be expected that they will do all they can including the use of magical means, to ensure that the baby will develop with a set of desirable characteristics.

Considering the ritual from such a general point of view, it is easy to point out parallels in many cultures. We can read, for example in the ancient *Grihya Sutras*:<sup>32</sup>

When a son has been born, (the father) should . . . give him to eat . . . butter and honey with which he has ground gold (dust), with (the verse), "I administer to thee the wisdom ('veda') of honey, of ghee . . ." Approaching (his mouth) to (the child's) two ears he murmurs the "production of intelligence" . . . He touches (the child's) two shoulders with (the verse) "Be a stone, be an axe, be insuperable gold . . ."

It is quite clear that the same sort of ritual is to be found in the Vedic rituals and we can note that some of the same symbols and methods are used, such as a stone, an axe, a sword, a book and touching of parts of the body.

When dealing with such self-evident ceremonies, the researcher comes to rely even more upon his own knowledge of the surrounding cultures with surrounding cultures. This is so in the case of the country road of central Thailand, where instead of a book, a pencil and pen for a boy baby, and a needle and thread for a girl. Among the Laotians around Vientiane, during the ceremony the people will place the baby's mattress 'according to the sex of the child', a dagger or needle, a pencil, a book or some kitchen utensils so that when growing up the child should be brave, studious or skilled in household duties'.<sup>33</sup> The Red Tai of northern

<sup>32</sup> Taken from the *Asvalayana Grihya-Sutra*, first Adhyaya, 15th Kandika, as translated by H. Oldenberg, *The Grihya-Sutras, Rules of Vedic Domestic Ceremonies*, Part II, Delhi: Motilal Barasidass, 1967, p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Archambault, 'Birth Rites', p. 134.

Vietnam observe a ritual of *takat* the child out to 'see the light' during which a boy touches a gun and a fishing net, and a girl touches objects which stand for household duties.

With the help of these ethnographic accounts it becomes quite likely that the various elements which we have noticed in the *aw ook can* ritual indeed form part of Tai ritual in general. A comparison of the various winnowing basket rituals and rituals of introducing the child to the world can lead to an awareness that certain elements occur in different order amongst different Tai peoples. We should therefore distinguish between the following ritual aspects at this early stage of a child's life:

1. The rocking or bouncing on a winnowing tray. This occurs sometimes immediately after birth, on other occasions three days after birth, and is intended to mildly starle the child and to officially enter the baby into the world of the humans. This aspect is widespread amongst Tai groups, but thus far no report amongst any western groups have been found.
2. Touching of objects which give desirable qualities. Ubiquitous amongst the Tai is the custom of placing some objects related to a child's future tasks nearby or letting the child touch these objects. The Khamyang people made this aspect prominent in their *aw ook can* ritual.<sup>34</sup>
3. Exposing a child to the elements. This is done by letting it face light and forcing it to touch the earth, and is found amongst at least four distinct Tai groups. Apart from the Khamyang ritual described above, there is a similar custom in southern Thailand,<sup>35</sup> the Red Tai expose a child to the light<sup>36</sup> and in the ethnography of Archaimbault we notice that the midwife brings in a heap of earth and makes the baby trample on it.<sup>37</sup>
4. Giving presents and tying the wrists. This ritual occurs amongst all Tai groups and forms a standard procedure amongst the post-natal activities. The Khamyang share fully in this Tai ritual.

### **The first hairshaving**

The ritual first hairshaving was reported by a Phakey informant. The first shaving has to take place on an auspicious day which is calculated according to the child's date and time of birth. A big pot has to be boiled to the brim with water and some golden and silver ornaments have to be placed in the water. Then the child's head is washed and carefully shaven. A tuft of hair is left standing on the back of the skull, just behind the fontanel. The hair which has been shaven off is collected and thrown on the road. After the shaving ritual, the customary ritual to increase the child's vitality and strength is held.

In the literature on the Tai in general there are various accounts of the first hair-shaving ceremonies. In Shan amongst whom Milne worked shave a child's head, except a tuft on the crown of the skull. The first hair which is cut off is very carefully preserved. It is put into a little bag which is hung around the child's neck.<sup>38</sup> For Thailand, Phya Anuman Rajadhon reports

<sup>34</sup> The same idea, using booklets, pencils and needles, but this time applied to a future rebirth during a Buddhist ceremony, is described in Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, pp. 245-6.

<sup>35</sup> Cittatham, *Khanophthanum*, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Robert, *Notes*, p. 42

<sup>37</sup> Archaimbault, 'Birth Ritual', pp. 134-5.

<sup>38</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 371

also that after shaving a clump of hair is left at the top of the head. He reports that the shaven hair is placed in a banana-leaf container. Sometimes flowers are mixed in and the container is disposed of by floating it down the river, or by throwing it away, whichever is more convenient.<sup>31</sup>

This ritual has not been described for the eastern Tai groups. In general it appears to be identical with the ancient Indian custom of shaving a child's head leaving the *sikha*, or tuft of hair on the crown standing. The word *sikha* may have been abbreviated to the common Thai word *cuk*, meaning top knot. The Phakey of Assam also use the word *cuk* to denote the tuft of hair.

The combination of an absence of reports on a child's hairshaving for Tai groups which have not been subjected to 'Indianisation' and the similarities between the Indian ritual and that amongst Thai and Assamese Tai leads to the conclusion that the custom is probably a borrowing from the Indianised peoples with whom the Tai who trekked westwards came into contact and that it does not belong to the Ancient Tai culture of the first millennium A.D.

### Traditional hairstyle and headdress (males)

Though strictly speaking a discussion of Tai hairstyle and headdress does not belong in a chapter on the early stages of life, the discussion of the first hairshaving leads to a diversion into this area.

The traditional hairstyle of the Assamese Tai males appears to have been one where the hair is allowed to grow long and gathered into a top-knot. A white turban is wound around the head so as to leave the top-knot exposed. This mode of grooming is clear from illustrations and descriptions made last century<sup>32</sup> and today we can still find the occasional old man who winds his hair into a knot on the crown of his head and wears a white cloth wound around the head without covering the top-knot. However, such old men will readily admit that their ways of gathering the hair and winding a turban are not strictly according to the traditional rules. The previous generations reportedly took much more care with their headdress than people in the twentieth century. Nowadays men do not grow their hair to reach a proper length and those who carry a turban do not worry about the right length of cloth or about the manner of winding.

The only variations present-day Assamese Tai could recall in the traditional hairdo is that the Khamti did not use a wooden hairpin, but Khamyang and Phakey used such an instrument. A hairpin amongst the Khamyang was called *kat haan*, but Phakey called it *maai khad ho*, or *maai phak ho*. All three groups shared the long hair and the white turban.

<sup>31</sup> Rajadhon, *Life and Ritual*, p. 172. See also the short mention in Wales, 'Siamese Theory', p. 448; G. E. Gerini, *Chulakantamangala or the Tonsure Ceremony as Performed in Siam*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1976, pp. 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Delhi: Sanskarjan Prakashak, 1975, Section VII; E. T. Dalton, *Descriptive*

*Ethnology of Bengal*, 1872 as reprinted in V. Elwin (editor), *India's North-East Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 368; R. Wilcox, 'Memoir of a Survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries, executed in 1825-6-7-8', *Hill Tracts Between Assam and Burma, Selection of Papers*, Delhi: Vivek Publishing Company, 1978, p. 73.

In order to determine whether the traditional Assamese Tai headgear has elements in common with other Tai groups it is necessary to isolate cases where no obvious borrowing from other cultures have taken place. For example, the old 'Siamese' way of hairdressing whereby men (and women) crop the hair so that it stands up like a bristle may be dismissed as a fashion which was imported from Cambodia.

Regarding the Ahom people, in the seventeenth century account by Talish, men are described to 'wrap a piece of fine linen round the head'<sup>11</sup>. From a remark that 'Mussalmans, Morias, Doms and Haris were forbidden to wear their hair long'<sup>12</sup> we may infer that it was the custom amongst the Ahoms to do just that. Amongst present-day Ahoms the turban can still be found. For example, during an Ahom wedding ceremony, not only the officiating priest, but also the groom, the groom's chief representative and the father of the bride were found wearing turbans. Invariably Ahom turbans were either made of golden-coloured *muga* silk or of pure white material. No decoration was found on the turbans.

Amongst the western groups the most detailed account comes again from Milne, who describes how young men of marriageable age become 'very particular as to the style and twist of their turbans, which are made of flimsier cloth than those worn by women; they are of thin cotton, or muslin, or silk, and are worn so that the knot of hair is shown in the middle'.<sup>13</sup> From the many photographs in her book it is clear that almost all men wear white turbans. There is no mention or sign of the use of hairpins in the male coiffure.

For the Lue there is a report, published in 1925, which states that a hundred years ago or more, men 'kept their hair tied up in a 'bun' in the middle of the head, and wound a red or white cloth round it in the form of a turban'.<sup>14</sup> Davies, on the other hand mentions the use of yellow silk turbans as the common male custom for the Tai Lue.<sup>15</sup>

An endeavour to establish the traditional Siamese hairstyle has been made by Gerini. Basing himself upon an unspecified Sukhothai inscription and upon ancient wall paintings in Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, Gerini comes to the conclusion that royal personages of both sexes wore a top-knot, surmounted by a chaplet of flowers. Nobles of less exalted rank wore a diadem of precious cloth around the conically shaped toupet and on the outside of this a gauze scarf, wound up like a turban. (Gerini's remarks on 'Siamese coiffure' in periods before the thirteenth century obviously refer to Khmer and Mon peoples who inhabited the region now known as Thailand during those earlier centuries).<sup>16</sup> To this may be added a stray remark made by a Chinese traveller in the fourteenth century. The king of Siam is described as wearing a cotton turban on his head and men and women as doing their hair in a knot and wearing white turbans.<sup>17</sup> The only other

<sup>11</sup> J. Sarkar, 'Assam and the Ahoms in 1660 A.D.' *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. I, 1915, p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 265.

<sup>13</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 69 and 114. See the photograph opp. 114.

<sup>14</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> H. R. Davies, *Yun-nan: The Link Between India and the Yangtze*, Taipei:

Ch'eng Wen, 1970, p. 382.

<sup>16</sup> Gerini, *Chulakantinangala*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> W. W. Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century' Part II, *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XVI, 1915, pp. 101-2 and p. 104.

evidence which may have relevance as to the Siamese male hairstyle so many centuries ago is the depiction on the twelfth century Angkor Wat reliefs of 'Siam' soldiers. These soldiers, generally considered to be Tai, wear long hair which partly falls to the shoulders and partly seems collected on the crown of the head, wrapped in many bands of material. Though the hair is piled up high, there is no sign of a turban in this scene.<sup>48</sup>

For the Tai tribes of upper Laos and Vietnam there are various descriptions of traditional male headdress, especially in the older ethnographies. The Tai Neua, for example, are reported to roll and knot their long hair and keep the knot into place with a comb. They wind a turban around it. From the photographs supplied with Bourlet's articles it is quite clear that these turbans are white.<sup>49</sup> The Red Tai also carry a turban, usually white. This turban is described as being rather short. It is knotted in front and the ends may or may not be tucked away.<sup>50</sup> The White Tai, according to Silvestre, had, at one time in this century almost abandoned their traditional coiffure in favour of an Annamite fashion. However, on certain ceremonial occasions the old way of dressing could still be observed. Males had their hair shaved, but for a long strand of hair left growing on top of the skull. At home this hair could hang loose, but in public it had to be neatly rolled into a chignon. Silvestre calls it a Chinese-type coiffure. The traditional male costume comprised a turban, rather short, wound negligently around the head. It was, like the rest of the costume, of a very dark-blue colour. The White Tai described by Abadie sometimes shave the head. Abadie agrees with Silvestre that such a habit indicates Chinese influence. They roll up their long hair in a chignon. The blue turban described by Abadie is quite voluminous and it is wound in a rather irregular manner.<sup>51</sup> The White Tai of the Black River, sometimes shave two or three cm around the hairline and let the rest grow long. The hair is tucked up and surrounded by a haphazardly wound, voluminous blue turban, which is often made of silk.<sup>52</sup>

The Tho do not shave any part of the head and their long hair is rolled into a chignon which may be held into place by a comb. The blue turban is bigger than that of the Annamites and folded very neatly.<sup>53</sup> A photograph of a group of Tai Nung demonstrates that these also wear blue turbans and that their hair is knotted on top of the skull.<sup>54</sup> The Tai Nhang are described as dressing like the Ning, their hair rolled up and folded in a turban.<sup>55</sup>

This overview of traditional male hairstyles and headdresses shows clearly that the Assamese Tai with their white turbans and chignon fit well into a Tai continuum. All traditional male hairstyles feature the hair worn long and gathered together on the crown of the head and all traditional costumes comprise a turban. The colour of the turban is white amongst all western Tai and there are some central and eastern groups which also

<sup>48</sup> L. P. Briggs, *The Ancient Khmer Empire*, pp. 13-4.  
Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, N.S., Vol. 41, Pt. 1, 1951, p. 200.

<sup>49</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 356.

<sup>50</sup> Robert, *Nom*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> Le Capitaine Silvestre, 'Les Thaï p. 80.  
Blancs de Phong-Tho' *Bulletin de l'Ecole*  
*Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Vol. 18, 1918,

<sup>52</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 64.  
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80 and the illustration opposite.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

carry a white headdress. Most of the eastern Tai have a dark blue turban and the Lue are the only group for whom different hues are reported. Although it seems safe to surmise that the Tai of the first millennium probably wore their hair on top of the skull and folded a turban around this central point, it is not here the place to speculate on the colour of the turban. In order to make an intelligent guess on the matter we need to include a survey of the traditional styles of the various non-Tai minorities in southern China, northern Vietnam, Laos and Thailand and consider likely culture contact.

#### **Traditional hairstyle and headdress (female)**

Unlike the males, where the ancient hairdo is almost forgotten, many Assamese Tai women continue until the present day to wear traditional headgear, especially amongst the Phakey peoples. The main difference between Assamese Tai men and women as regards their coiffure is that the women wear their long hair wound up in a roll against the back of the skull, whilst traditionally, men wore their hair higher up. The women also wear turbans of a white colour, but these are wound in such a manner that they do not leave any hair exposed (contrary to the male method of wearing a turban). The women's turbans are neatly wound and the loose ends are tucked out of sight.<sup>57</sup>

Regarding the Khamti, there are distinct styles on record. Gogoi, who is quite familiar with the Assamese Khamti, says the old women wear a turban of thin white cotton.<sup>58</sup> Quite a different woman's hairdo is described for the Khamti by Dalton, who mentions that the women draw their long hair up, and wear it in one massive roll on top of the head. The hair roll is four or five inches high and worn so much in front as to form a continuum with the slope of the forehead. The roll is encircled by an embroidered band, 'the fringed and tasseled ends of which hang down behind'.<sup>59</sup> Thus there seem two distinct traditions, one with the hair rolled on the back of the skull and a covering turban, the other, with the hair piled up high, wrapped in a strip of material. In order to come to an opinion on whether one or both of these hairstyles conform to a more general Tai pattern, yet another search through the ethnographic accounts is necessary.

Shan women of Namkham wear their long hair twisted into a tight coil without using a hairpin on the back of the head, and on all official occasions the hair will be completely hidden by a coloured turban. From the many photographs scattered throughout Milne's book it is clear that there is a great variety in colours and patterns in women's turbans. Often the richly embroidered end is allowed to hang loose, but there seems to be no prescribed manner for this display of needlecraft, some let the end fall on the back, some to the right side of the face, others on the left, whilst still others

<sup>57</sup> See for examples the photographs published in Bancop Phanthumethaa, *Kaa Le Muun Tai*, (opposite p. 216) and at the end of Saarnaat, *Yiam Thai Aahom*.

<sup>58</sup> Gogoi, *The Tai Khamti*, p. xliv. See also the photographs.

<sup>59</sup> Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology*, as reprinted in Elwin, *India's North-East Frontier*, p. 369. See also the illustration reproduced in Elwin's book opposite p. 144 and Wilcox,

will tuck the end away. The volume of the turban is about equal to that worn by the men, adding approximately one inch to the height and width of the head.<sup>60</sup>

In addition, Milne observed a quite different style of wearing turbans amongst Shan women who originate from China. These wrap a very long piece of black cloth in neat coils so as to form a tall cylindrical shape at least ten inches high.<sup>61</sup>

The Lue women have dark blue turbans with a gold fringe and they wear their hair in a 'bun'.<sup>62</sup> It is also reported that large gold or silver hair ornaments are stuck into the heavy coil of black hair on top of the head.<sup>63</sup> The same report by the handress of a Khin princess.<sup>64</sup>

For the Tai of Thailand, Gerini's remarks on the traditional Sukhothai hairstyle with a top-knot surrounded by flowers or wound in a turban refer to both sexes.<sup>65</sup> The seventeenth century report of Schouten who lived in Ayutthaya for many years and who mentions the use of gold pins in the hair may also point to the common practice of rolling the hair into a chignon.<sup>66</sup> De la Loubère's drawing of a Siamese woman later that century, shows the hair folded up at the back of the head.<sup>67</sup>

The adult women amongst the Tai Neda, according to Bourlet's photographs, wear dark coloured turbans which cover all the hair. No decoration is visible on these turbans. The turban is wrapped tightly around the temples, but there is a considerable variation with regard to the techniques of folding the ends of material. Some women let two ends stick out on either side at the upper end, others fold the whole turban in a big roll on top of the head so that both ends are invisible whilst yet others let one end hang out of the turban. In general the turban is a little higher than that of the males.<sup>68</sup>

The Red Tai women of Lang Chanh rarely have ornaments on their turbans, which are usually blue in colour. The hair is folded in a chignon at the back of the head and the ends of the turban are shown to protrude at the top. Like the Tai Neda, the impression is that the turban is wound tightly around the temples and widens slightly towards the top. The turban heightens the silhouette by some two inches. The turban does not cover the chignon. A hairpin is commonly used through the chignon.<sup>69</sup>

The women of the Tai Jo (or Thanl hoa) have a large turban which covers all the hair. One end sticks out from the top, the other hangs over the back. Near the ends of the turban is a decorated band. Young girls are reported to wear a bamboo cylinder under their turban in order not to disturb their hairdo.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, pp. 68-9 *et passim*.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135 and frontispiece. See also O. Rheinwald, 'Die Nichtchinesischen Stämme Südchinas, ein Überblick', *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens*, Vol. 33, Part A, 1942, Plates V, VI and VII and M. Collis, *Lords of the Sunset; A Tour In the Shan States*, London: Faber, 1938, opposite p. 229.

<sup>62</sup> Le May, 'The Lu', p. 161; Davie, *Yun-nan*, p. 383.

<sup>63</sup> Dodd, *The Tai Race*, p. 184

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201. The Khan live in and around Kengtung in the Burmese Shan States.

<sup>65</sup> Gerini, *Chulakantamangala*, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> J. Schouten, *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan & Siam* by P. Caron and J. Schouten (edited by C. R. Boxer), London: The Argonaut Press, 1935, p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> De la Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, opposite p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', *passim*.

<sup>69</sup> Robert, *Notes*, pp. 8-12 and Plate L

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Regarding the White Tai, they carry their long hair rolled up in a chignon at the back of the head. For ceremonial occasions they carry a blue turban, casually folded around the head and of which both ends are allowed to fall on the shoulders.<sup>73</sup> Abadie's account of the White Tai woman agrees in broad outline with that of Silvestre and Durand. Few women wear a turban and those who do wrap it loosely around the head, letting both ends hang on the shoulders. He provides, however, more details regarding the hairdo. The hair is parted into a left and right section and gathered in a chignon low at the back of the head and fixed with a long hairpin.<sup>74</sup>

Black Tai women are reported to wear dark blue, voluminous turbans which are wound in regular pleats.<sup>75</sup> Darand provides a photograph of high-ranking women of this group from which it is clear that these wear the hair piled up high on the crest of the head.<sup>76</sup> Regarding the Tho women, they wear a big, neatly folded blue turban identical to those worn by the men of the group.<sup>77</sup> Nung women have a very elaborate hairdo, and an intricate headdress on ceremonial occasions. Their hair is pinned up with silver hairpins into a chignon on top of the skull and this is wrapped in a small turban. The turban is covered with a white cloth of which only a strip is visible in the front of the completed head covering. Around and over the white cloth a second turban is wound which is of blue material and which carries transverse embroidered bands. The ends are made of a sort of white thread to which an ornament is attached. These ends hang over both shoulders. The frontal silhouette shows a turban which winds towards the top. The ordinary, non ceremonial wear consists of a turban of which the ends are crossed in front.<sup>78</sup> Nhanz women wear a blue turban wrapped in large folds whilst the Pai-tai carry a triangular structure, wrapped in a blue turban and a blue cloth.<sup>79</sup> The traditional women's costume of an unspecified Tai group in southern China photographed by Ollone contains dark-coloured turbans folded neatly over the top and back of the head, leaving several inches of hair and the ears exposed.<sup>80</sup>

This overview of Tai women's traditional hairstyles and head dresses is naturally incomplete. Without a much fuller survey, which takes traditional styles of surrounding cultures also into account we cannot even begin to assess possible outside influences. Here we can do no more than establish common motifs, a nongst the data and assess whether or not the Assamese Tai conform to the pattern.

With respect to the hairdo, the chignon at the back of the head is most frequently encountered, but there are also distinct groups such as the Lue, the Black Tai and, guessing from the shape of the turban also the Chinese Shan, who roll the hair up high on the crest of the head. All traditional hairstyles encountered fit these two categories. Therefore it is clear that the Assamese Tai who display both hairstyles conform generally to the Tai

- <sup>73</sup> Silvestre, "Les Thai Blanches", pp. 14-6; M. Durand, "Notes sur les pays tai de Phong-tho", *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indo-chinoises*, N.S. Vol. 27, No. 2, 1952, p. 204 and Fig 22B.  
<sup>74</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 68.  
<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 75.  
<sup>76</sup> Durand, "Notes sur les pays tai", Pl. XIX, B.  
<sup>77</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 36  
<sup>78</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 81 and Plates 22 and 23.  
<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 89 and p. 94.  
<sup>80</sup> H. d'Ollone, *Les derniers barbares; Chine-Tibet-Mongolie*, Paris: Lafitte, 1911, p. 151.

pattern. The use of hairpins seems to be widespread, but not ubiquitous. It is possible, however, that some ethnographers who met Tai women only fleetingly and saw them only in their official dress complete with turban, had no opportunity to notice such details.

Concerning the head dresses, turbans are found amongst almost all groups. There is, however, considerable variation in the manner of folding the turban, almost every group appears to have developed its own characteristic way of wrapping and folding. Occasionally the turban-cloth is decorated with embroidery, but in the great majority of cases turbans devoid of ornamentation. Though there is some variation in colour, especially amongst the Shan, dark blue is the predominant hue. The Assamese Tai women thus again conform to the general pattern in that they traditionally wear turbans, but it is remarkable that they only have white ones.

### Names

Returning to the early stages of life of the Assamese Tai, the next stage after hair shaving is the choosing of a name. In the time available it was not possible to make a proper demographic survey and we do not have a full list of names. Amongst the main informants and their family members it could be noticed, however, that many carried Assamese given names. Only occasionally was a traditional Tai given name encountered. The simplest method of recognising a Tai given name is by noting that it is usually a monosyllabic word preceded by a prefix which indicates the birth order.

Altogether there are at least fourteen prefixes, seven for males and seven for females and they can be tabulated as follows:

TABLE 3  
PREFIXES INDICATING BIRTH ORDER

Males	aai	ngi	saam	sai	ngo	nuk	nak
Females	yae	ii	aam	ai	wo <sup>79</sup>	uk	it
Birth order	first	second	third	fourth	fifth	sixth	seventh

Naturally, the first two or three prefixes are most common, and the ones indicating a higher order become exceedingly rare. Some old people reported that there is a prefix 'nak' for an eighth son, but they could not think of the female equivalent. If a person would have more than eight children of the same gender he would have to begin numbering them all over again, but the second series was more like that of beasts, it was hardly human to have that many children. At times a pre-prefix, 'la', can be encountered, for example in the name La Ne Gorapati. Informants disagreed as to the meaning of this 'la', according to one learned Pnakey man it was nothing but a term of endearment, but a Khamti village chief was of the opinion that

<sup>79</sup> From the fifth numerical onward many times left out a numeral in the female list. Informants became rather unsure and some-

the word was an abbreviated form of 'luuk' (child). The two explanations do not necessarily exclude each other. The prefixes are used for every live birth and even if a child only lives for one day it occupies a place in the family order.

A Phakey informant was able to remember a list of animal symbols which were traditionally linked with the first seven male prefixes. They are given here in Table 4:

TABLE 4  
MALE PREFIXES AND SYMBOLISM

Prefix	Order of birth	Symbol (Phakey language)	Meaning
aai	first	chaang	elephant
ngi	second	nguk	crocodile
saam	third	muu	bear
sai	fourth	suu	tiger
ngo	fifth	maew	cat
nuk	sixth	moon	otter
nak	seventh	haen	wild cat

According to this informant, these symbols may well be related to the traditional professions the sons of a Tai king would be assigned to. Elephant, for the first son would be an indication that the first son was in charge of the army. Crocodile indicates that a second son should head the navy. However, no informant could venture an opinion as to the symbolism for the remaining animal signs.

The numbering system for the birth order is quite distinct from the common Tai counting system (nu 12, soom, saam, si, haa, hok, eet, paet).<sup>80</sup> Yet in the cultures of the Tai groups other than the Assamese Tai there are many traces of such alternative counting systems. In the ethnographic literature on Tai systems of naming the elaborate system of prefixes has been found amongst the Shan and the Khun (a group of Tai speakers in Kengtung State, Burma). Egerod records for the Shan two lists. The male terms are *aai* (1st), *i* (second), *shaam* (third), *shai* (fourth), *ngo* (fifth) and *nok* (sixth), whilst females have *yi* (1st), *i* (second), *dam* (third), *ai* (fourth), *o* (fifth), *ok* (sixth) and *'it* (seventh). For the Khun he reports for males *adi*, *ii*, *saam* and *sai*, respectively denoting first, second, third and fourth, and for women, *eei*, *ii*, *dam* and *a*, for the same list and *ok* for the sixth.<sup>81</sup> (The orthography has been changed for easier comparison). A similar list is reported in Hillier.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> There is yet another separate numbering system, only used for calendrical purposes as part of the ancient sixty-year cycle, but this is not the place to describe the calendrical system, which encompasses the numbers 1-10.

<sup>81</sup> S. Egerod, "A Note on Some Chinese Numerals as Loan Words in Tai", *T'oung Pao*, Vol. XLVII, 1959, pp. 67-8. See also

P. K. Benedict, 'Chinese and Thai Kin Numeratives' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 65, 1945, pp. 33-7. Cf. Barua, *The Singphos*, p. 71.

<sup>82</sup> W. R. Hillier, 'Notes on the Manners, Customs, Religion and Superstitions of the Tribes Inhabiting the Shan States', *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 21, 1892, p. 117 and 120.

In the Thai language there are clear remnants of alternative numbering systems. It is clear in some archaic kinship terms. The word *aai* is used in the thirteenth century Sukhothai inscription to denote the eldest brother<sup>83</sup> and this word is still known in Thai in the meaning of 'the elder brother, the oldest son'.<sup>84</sup> Checking through the Royal Academy Dictionary, Egerod found the following archaic male numeratives *aai* (first), *ii* (second), *sai* (fourth), *ngua* (fifth), *lok* (sixth), *cet* (seventh), *ok* (ninth) and *ong* (tenth), whilst female numeratives comprised *aai* (first), *ii* (second), *ok* (sixth) *ek* (seventh), *ao* (ninth) and *ang* (tent<sup>th</sup>). In present-day Thai we find some of these unusual numberings back in the traditional numbering of the months, where the first and second month are called the *in* and *ii* months, and only from the third month onward the common Thai numerals are used. Also it is found in the Thai word for twenty, *ngamp*. It is also possible that the widespread Tai custom of calling males with the prefix *a-* and females with the prefix *u-* is somehow related to this much more elaborate system of numbering the order in which boys and girls are born in the family.<sup>85</sup>

There is thus no doubt that the numeral kin system of the Assamese Tai forms part of the Tai tradition. As to the possible origin of the numeric birth order system, the evidence thus far collected points to parallels with numeric systems of southern China. In Table 5 the Assamese Tai system, that of the Shan, Khün, and old Siamese are placed next to modern Cantonese and ancient Chinese (of approximately 600 A.D.).<sup>86</sup> Indeed, as Egerod has indicated, the series demonstrates some old loans.<sup>87</sup>

TABLE 5  
TAI BIRTH ORDER PREFIXES AND CHINESE NUMBERS

Assamese Tai		Shan		Khün		Siamese		Cantonese <sup>88</sup>		Ancient Chinese
Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	
<i>aai</i>	<i>yae</i>	<i>aai</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>aai</i>	<i>oei</i>	<i>aai</i>	<i>uai</i>	<i>yii</i>	<i>iet</i>	
<i>ngi</i>	<i>ii</i>	<i>yi</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>yii</i>	<i>ii</i>	<i>yii</i>	<i>ü</i>	<i>yi</i>	<i>nzi</i>	
<i>saam</i>	<i>aam</i>	<i>shaam</i>	<i>zaam</i>	<i>saam</i>	<i>aam</i>			<i>sam</i>	<i>ts'am</i>	
<i>sai</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>shai</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>sai</i>	<i>ai</i>	<i>sai</i>		<i>shi</i>	<i>si</i>	
<i>ngo</i>	<i>wo<sup>89</sup></i>	<i>ngo</i>	<i>o</i>			<i>ngua</i>		<i>ngo</i>	<i>ngu</i>	
<i>nuk</i>	<i>uk</i>	<i>nok</i>	<i>ok</i>		<i>ok</i>	<i>lok</i>	<i>ok</i>	<i>luk</i>	<i>liuk</i>	
<i>nak</i>	<i>it</i>		<i>it</i>			<i>cet</i>	<i>ek</i>	<i>tsa</i>	<i>ts'iet</i>	

<sup>83</sup> A. B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, 'The Inscription of King Rama Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 A.D.), *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 59, Pt. 2, 1971, p. 197.

<sup>84</sup> G. B. McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969, p. 993.

<sup>85</sup> Egerod, 'A Note on Some Chinese Numerals', p. 68.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 219. In central Thailand these prefixes have acquired a derogatory meaning.

<sup>87</sup> From B. Karlsgren, *Grammatica Serica Recensa*, Stockholm: Museum of Far

Eastern Antiquities, 1964. I thank Mr J. Jorgensen for his help in looking up the relevant entries. For typographical reasons the diacritical marks have been omitted.

<sup>88</sup> Egerod, 'A Note on Some Chinese Numerals', pp. 70-1. See also P. K. Benedict, 'Chinese and Thai Kin Numerals', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 65, 1945, pp. 33-37.

<sup>89</sup> I am grateful to Ms A. Chang of the Australian National University for providing me with a transcription of these numerals.

<sup>90</sup> The variant *wo* for the fifth female reminds us of Mandarin *wu* for 'five'.

Regarding the family names, those Assamese Tai who have been in close contact with the Assamese culture and who have already largely forgotten the Tai language have come to use common family names, which bear no relation to their original Tai names. Thus the name Shyam, undoubtedly chosen to denote Tai identity, is shared by many households in Khamyang villages. Upon further questioning it becomes clear, however, that all these Khamyang peoples still know their traditional clan names. Thus a man who identified himself as Shyam will, upon request, reveal that he belongs for example to the Tungkhang or to the Pangyok clan.

We use the word clan, because the groupings which are traditionally distinguished by the Assamese Tai comprise many families, in theory they go back to common ancestry, and they are strictly exogamous. The Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti use the word *phan* to denote these clans. All Assamese Tai share the system of patrilineality when determining membership of clans.

Though all three Assamese Tai groups amongst whom the research is based have *phans*, it was only amongst the Khamti that a fairly complete overview of the names of the clans and some of the myths related to the *phans* have been recorded. Most of the elderly Khamti could enumerate six or seven *phans*, but comparing their lists and checking with an ancient handwritten history book preserved amongst the Khamti, it was possible to give the names of nine Khamyang clans which probably encompass all the Khamyang people of Assam. The names of these nine *phans* are presented in Table 6, together with some relevant information obtained in discussions regarding the Khamyang clans.

There exists much more detailed information on Khamyang clans and their role in Khamyang history. However, the custodians of these legends wish to keep them secret, probably because these are references of inter-*phan* fighting, and until in their opinion the prohibition to publish does no longer apply, this wish must be respected.

In certain village rituals which have been discontinued some fifty years ago, each Khamyang *phan* was represented. Also there is amongst the oldest Khamyang the memory of each *phan* having its own prescriptions regarding *wan kam*, or days which were set aside for ritual purposes when members of a *phan* were not allowed to work in the fields.

The Phakey and Khamti Tai share the *phan* system just described for the Khamyang. All have exogamous patrilineal clans, though the names of the clans are not shared. Phakey informants still recollect a few *phan* names, such as Chakhap, Chakhen, Thumung and Funten, but it appears that the tradition has been largely forgotten. Unlike the Khamyang and Khamti, the Phakey have considerably relaxed former exogamy rules. Nowadays boys and girls of the same *phan* may marry if they can establish at least three generations distance to each other. A Khamti Village chief who was asked to name some Khamti *phans* readily enumerated seventeen names. Though the list need not necessarily be complete they are presented in alphabetical order in Table 7.

In the description of a Khamti village in Arunachal Pradesh, a number of clans are mentioned, namely Namsoon, Mankung, Manglang and Mangyok. The first two we can readily recognise as Namsuum and Mankung, but the others may be added to the list of Khamti clans. It is noteworthy that

TABLE 6  
THE NINE KHAMYANG PHANS<sup>91</sup>

Name	Remarks
Thaomung	The Thaomung clan is often associated with the concept 'messenger' or ' harbinger', probably a reference to an episode in Khamyang oral history.
Chaohai	The Chaohai clan is associated with the leadership of the Khamyang peoples. In upper Assam there are reputedly no living representatives of this clan. They officiated at communal sacrifices.
Chaoluu	'People from Luu', reportedly their original village in Burma was called 'Uuluu'. Chaoluu people were amongst the first groups of Khamyang to migrate to Assam.
Chaolek	'Metal people'. This clan is associated with blacksmiths. The word 'lek' refers to metal.
Thangkhano	One of the early groups of Khamyang to settle in Assam. Some believe that an Ahom king was a member of this clan.
Wailong	Also known as Bailong. This clan seems to be associated with astrologers.
Paangyok	Sometimes linked with the concept of a banana-shoot. One informant considered the clan to be exceptionally vigorous and rich in offspring.
Phaalik	Also known as Paalok (often confused with Cholek). This clan is associated with teachers, probably because of the work <i>lik</i> , 'letter' or 'book'.
Chaosong	According to one informant this clan is also known as Chaowan.

TABLE 7  
KHAMTI PHAN NAMES

Name	Remarks	Name	Remarks
Chaomung		Manlai	
Chaophuu	The second group to arrive in Assam	Manpang	
Kamthung		Manphai	
Langnuu		Manpung	
Lukkhun		Manwai	
Lungchot		Namsuum	
Lungthak			The first <i>phan</i> to arrive in Assam
Mancae		Nannuu	
Mankhung		Nongnguu	

the Namsuum clan, which was reputedly the first one to arrive in Assam is recognised in this descriptive account as the superior of the clans. The

<sup>91</sup> The order of *phans* is that used in the history book referred to in the text.

village chief belongs to that clan.<sup>92</sup> In February 1980, when the researcher had the opportunity to visit Borkhamti Gaon in North Lachimpur, he asked a village elder about the number of clans. It was asserted that the Khamtis had a list of sixty clans. In the list that was readily enumerated most of the names mentioned above were repeated, but also various new ones could be added, namely Chen, Haukhow, Huupak, Khambone, Khanukhow, Laiang, Mekri, Matilar, Mannue, Mansai, Mantoe, Maneskano, Musaa, Muang and Saaku. All these clans are strictly exogamous. If a couple were found violating this rule they would be paraded around the village ridiculed and made to eat food from a trough as if they were animals.

In order to determine whether or not the Assamese Tai system of exogamy in patrilineal clans may be regarded as 'typically Tai', a survey of the relevant literature is necessary.

There is no doubt that the Ahom people divided themselves into clans. The seven principal ones were known as Satehara, Ahom, or the Ahoms of the seven Houses.

The first three houses were the royal family, the Burmanian family and the Bulang family. According to some, the remaining four 'brothers' [Brother] were the Doodhar, Mohin, Balang and Surma families. Others say that according to others they were the secular families, Teng, Simikor, Dibineta, and Durai. Each 'brother' was divided into a number of sub-groups, generally named after places where they settled after branching off from their original families. There were seven subdivisions of the royal family; eight of the Burmanian family; twelve of the Doodhar; seven of the Mohin and eight of the Bulang family.<sup>93</sup>

This information does not seem wholly correct, because a group of knowledgeable Ahoms assured the researcher that there are eighteen subdivisions amongst the Bulangs. At any rate it has been firmly stated that the Satehara Ahoms were never allowed marry wife within their seven houses.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, it should be understood that apart from the Satehara clans there are many other exogamous subdivisions which usually escape the notice of historians.

With regard to the Shan in Burma, no exogamous kin groups are mentioned by Milne.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, Leach has clearly demonstrated that amongst the various royal houses of the Shan patrilineages with totemic titles, as the Lue, and at least on one occasion a member of a Shan family stated that these patrilineages were strictly exogamous.<sup>96</sup> For the Lue, there is a report that the hereditary nobility has marriage rules which state that a person must marry outside his patrilineal surname group.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> B. K. Roy Burman, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Profiles of the Hill Areas of North-East India, Census of India 1961*, New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, p. 303.

<sup>93</sup> N. K. Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age, 1228-1826*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1970, p. 201.

<sup>94</sup> Indira Barua, *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978, p. 22.

<sup>95</sup> E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma; A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 44, London: The Athlone Press, 1970, pp. 216-7.

<sup>96</sup> Ying-liang Chiang, *Pai-i te Sheng-huo Wen-hua*, 1950, p. 179 as quoted in F. M. Lebar (et al.) *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, New Haven: HRAF Press, 1964, p. 209.

The Tai Yuan recognise matrilineal groups who share certain rituals. These groups are, however, not exogamous, and therefore, strictly speaking should not be regarded as clans.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the Yuan 'matrilocality' may be regarded as unique amongst Tai peoples. It may be related to the particular history of the Yunnan emperors, who caused the easing depletion of the adult male population.

With regard to the Tai peoples of Laos, Davis<sup>98</sup> is the authority. In the Lao tribes, no exogamous patriliney have been found. The clan system is bilateral and there is a tendency to exogamy, at least in the rural areas. These peoples, who do not practise the strict form of the Tu, do not necessarily provide a basis for the traditional more homogeneous Tai culture than exists amongst the Lao. Possibly are more isolated, non-Buddhist forms of Tu, as described by this:

The Black Tu of Nakhon are called a the White Tu of Phu-qui are reported to be divided into a number of exogamous patrilineal clans. Especially amongst the latter each clan is further subdivided into two phratries, one of which has the higher ceremonial rank and whose members can only marry members of other, even more superior phratries. In addition it is mentioned that these two groups recognise certain food taboos related to membership of a clan.<sup>99</sup> The most detailed description of the traditional Patriarchal system of the Black Tu of Son-la and Nakhon by Lafont establishes without any doubt the exogamous nature of the Tu. He also gives many details regarding the taboos of certain members of the same clan and indicates that it should be avoided to call the childless son of a patriarch.<sup>100</sup> Izikowitz reports of the Black Tu that the Tu is divided into *king*, groups of relatives carrying the same name. Membership is patrilineal and the groups are strictly exogamous.<sup>101</sup>

Also important the Red Tu<sup>102</sup> is a system of patrilineal exogamous clans, of which there are nine in Muang-loh. Apart from the strict rule of exogamy there are also clan prohibitions. One clan will respect the tiger, another will not kill a serpent. The Red Tu term for this grouping is *chao*. The Tu Lo of Nakhon have an even more precise notion on their clans and clan-taboos.<sup>103</sup>

Amongst the Thais descent is patrilineal, and there are nine groups (called *muh*) which carry off the same family name. Exogamy appears to be the only limitation.<sup>104</sup> Ieromai<sup>105</sup> for the Nung, it is reported that persons with the same name are forbidden to marry and that the descent rules are patrilineal.<sup>106</sup>

In this overview it has become clear that exogamous patrilineal groupings are the rule amongst a great number of Tai groups, ranging from northern

<sup>97</sup> A. Turton, 'Matrilineal Descent Groups and Spirit Cults of the Thai-Yuan in Northern Thailand', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 60, Pt. 2, 1972, p. 231.

<sup>98</sup> R. Davis, 'Muang Matrifocality', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 61, Pt. 2, 1973, p. 61. Cf. Durand, *Notes sur les pays tai*, p. 211 indicating a more general female cult.

<sup>99</sup> H. Maspero, 'Moeurs et coutumes des populations sauvages', in G. Maspero (ed.), *Un empire colonial français, l'Indochine*,

Paris: Van Oest, 1929, pp. 239-40.

<sup>100</sup> P. B. Lafont, 'Notes sur les familles patronymiques Thai Noires de Son-la et de Nghia-lo', *Anthropos*, Vol. 50, 1955, pp. 801-4.

<sup>101</sup> K. G. Izikowitz, 'Notes about the Tai', *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities Stockholm*, No. 34, 1962, pp. 80-1.

<sup>102</sup> Robert, *Notes*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>103</sup> Lebar, *Ethnic Groups*, p. 233.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Vietnam through Yunnan to Assam. The exceptions are the Siamese, the Laotians and the Yuan. Amongst these latter groups bilateral arrangements are made. The matrilineal descent groups of the Yuan are mainly religious groupings and have no bearing on marriage rules.

We may therefore safely conclude that the Assamese Tai appear to share yet another trait with other Tai with their system of *phan*. The ethnographies for northern Vietnamese Tai groups indicate a set of taboos. Thus far no such prohibitions have been encountered for the Tai of Assam, but the information on *phan* legends is as yet not complete and the possibility that later such beliefs will be found cannot be excluded. The word *phan* itself has not been encountered amongst the other groups as a designation for 'clan', but there seems to be a considerable variety of words used for the concept, and at this stage of research it is impossible to guess whether *phan*, *tinh*, *chao*, or *hing* represents the more authentic Tai appellation.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup>Cf. R. G. Cooper who mentions the Chinese term for clan: *se* (seng, shing; xeem) in 'Unity and Division in Hmong Social Categories in Thailand', *Studies in Asean Sociology, Urban Society and Social Change* (edited by P. S. Chen and H-D. Evers), Singapore: Chopmen, p. 305.

# 3

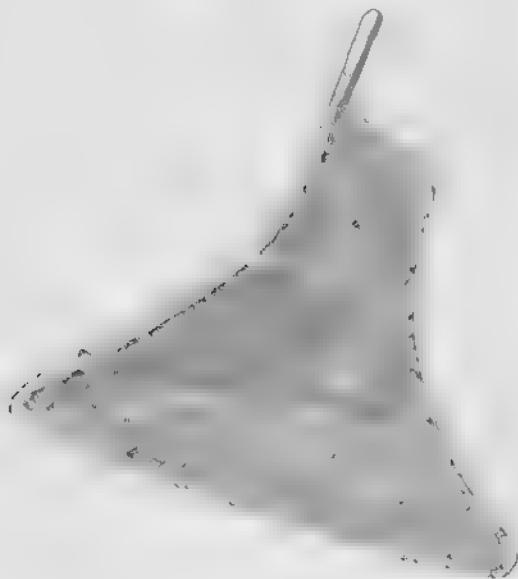
## SOME THERAPEUTIC RITUALS

In Chapter 2 two occasions were mentioned on which a child has some egg yolk applied to various parts of the body and white thread tied around the wrists, namely at the conclusion of the *aw ook att* ceremony and after the first shaving of the hair. These are not the only moments in an individual's life when this ritual which has thus far been called 'a ceremony to increase a person's vitality', occurs. Most Assamese Tai have their vitality finally increased on many separate occasions. In this chapter ethnographic data concerning these rituals and others will be presented. A detailed comparison of this Assamese material on vitality with data from other Tai groups would make the chapter too lengthy and this has been deferred to the following chapter.

### Catching lost vitality

When a person has suddenly become listless and tired it could be that one or more *khons* have been lost. A *khon* is an element of vitality, it is that which makes for vigour and strength. Although losing *khons* may happen to anybody, children seem to be more prone to this. As a person becomes adult it seems that he keeps better control over his vitality. The listless child's parents will try to determine where the *khons* could have escaped the body. They question the patient and check in their own memory when the youngster was last seen full of zest. Having established a likely place where a *khon* may have fled, for example, the spot where the child received a fright or stumbled and fell during play, thus giving a *khon* the opportunity to free itself, the parents may decide to hold the ritual of scooping up the *khon*. This ritual is called *soon khon* amongst all three Assamese Tai groups whose rituals have been studied, and it is performed in exactly the same manner amongst all of them.

In contrast with other *khon* rituals, which will be described below, *soon khon* for a sick child is essentially a woman's ritual. Though men may freely watch and, if appropriate, even extend a helping hand a group of elderly women are fully in charge of the scooping up ceremony, and the child's mother is prominent amongst them. *Soon khon* always takes place at dusk. Whilst the listless child is kept warm and comfortable at home, the group of elderly women go to the place where they believe the *khon* to have been lost. One of them has an apron or some similar cloth wrapped around her waist and in this she carries a food packet. This consists of a boiled egg and boiled rice wrapped in a piece of banana leaf. In addition she carries a fishing basket of triangular shape which the Tai call *khuk* (In Assamese: *takar* see figure 1). It is also considered useful to carry some article of clothing of the sick person. On arrival at the spot where the lost *khon* could be, the woman carrying the fishing implement begins to

FIG. 1 : *Khuk or Jakat*<sup>1</sup>

scoop over the ground and over the leaves of plants nearby and all assembled women say in a clear voice 'mua, maa, maa', which means 'come, come, come'.<sup>2</sup>

The *khon* could be attached to some piece of plant material, or, more likely, it could have crawled itself to some living insect. The Phakey and Khamti especially look for a living thing, such as a lizard, or a fish. All material that is scooped up is carefully deposited in a basin which is held open to receive the scrapings. The scrapings are then laid flat upon receiving them, this is carefully wrapped so as to prevent an insect from jumping out. The group of women slowly returns to the house, all the time scooping, gathering and calling 'maa, maa'. Arriving at home the women surround the patient, who is seated in the corner of the house (*sao phii lang*, or *sao phii nam*) which is associated with the ancestors. The apron and the odd jacket are placed in at the side of the bed and at this stage it is customary to perform a therapeutic ceremony which is not directly related to *soon khon*—the *chu malaung* ritual.<sup>3</sup>

*Chu malaung* is basically a method of drawing out evil substances from the body. During the *soon khon* ritual it takes the form of pulling seven strands of banana leaf over the patient's pulse from wrist to fingertip. The action should be done seven times for each hand. If the child is male the right hand is done first and then the left. If female it is done in the reverse order. Whilst the *chu malaung* takes place, as well as later in the *soon khon* ritual, the women surrounding the child say pure good wishes.

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Pakyntein, *Selected Handicrafts of Assam*, Census India 1961, Vol. III, Pt. VIII-A, Delhi: Manager of Publications, Civil Lines, 1966, opposite p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Amongst the Khamyang who have forgotten their Tai language, the same word

is used, but now in Assamese: 'aa, aa, aa.'

<sup>3</sup> The expression *chu malaung* was encountered mainly amongst Phakey people, a different expression for the same ritual heard amongst the Khamyang is *cet khot* (to wipe bad things away).

This *chu maluang* is concluded by binding a white cotton thread around the wrists and feet which also forms part of the *soon khon* ritual and is never resumed immediately afterwards.<sup>4</sup>

After *chu maluang* the food parcel is unwrapped, broken open, cleaned out, peeled and carefully examined for any signs suggesting trouble. This may reveal whether or not the child will recover soon. If there are, for example, several airlocks between the egg-white and yolk, it is believed one *khon* has been lost and that does not bode well for the patient. No airlock at all would be regarded as favourable. If a black mark is found on the egg white it accords to a Khamti informant that the patient will die. Naturally, only a fresh egg is selected to serve in the ritual. After this scrutiny the egg is divided into two halves. When the researcher had the opportunity to witness the *soon khon* rite, the Khamti informant a thread was used to divide the egg by slowly being pulled from the middle. Again, the two halves are carefully examined for telling signs. If there is a discoloration or a bitter pocket in the yolk it may be a sign that the patient has a bitter enemy or that his sickness is much more severe than first suspected. The child's mother (or another woman who takes charge of the ritual) then takes some of the crumbly yolk between thumb and forefinger and, whilst all women quickly repeat their good wishes, applies the *khon* to come back to the child's body, this substance is rubbed on top of the child's head. This application is called *mukkha*. A few small bits of yolk are taken and applied on various other parts of the body, on the ears, nose, chin, tops of the shoulders, neck, elbows, wrists, back, hips, knees, and ankles. The oleaginous mixture is applied on each of the patient's wrists, the right side first for boys, left side first for girls.

Meanwhile the aman with collected leaves and insectiles been bound and the bundle of scrappings is held on the head of the sick child, over with the banana leaf with boiled rice. This, reportedly, gives the *khon* a further chance to enter the body and again the women chant their invocation. The bundle is folded up again and pushed under or next to the child's pillow. It will remain there for at least one night and it is hoped that the *khon* has ample opportunity to come out and settle in its original dwelling place.

In order to make the *khon*'s surroundings attractive, small presents are offered to the patient, usually in the form of some coins. These also will be put under the pillow, together with the fishing basket and apron. All women present will take strands of white cotton and tie the child's wrists, mentioning their good wishes and may be adding a small offering if already received. The final stage of the *soon khon* ceremony consists of feeding the patient with the boiled rice, which may have been made more palatable by adding some salt. Some three days later the *soon khon* and apron can be replaced in their usual place and the leaves and rice, together with living creatures collected can be thrown outside.

The *soon khon* ritual demonstrates clearly how the Assamese Tai consider *khon* is to be like the tickle elements which may escape the body. In a

<sup>4</sup> The *chu maluang* ritual is described more fully at the end of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> In ritual context the use of modern implements is generally shunned. This may

be compared with the use of bamboo knife, mollusc shell or glass sherd to sever the umbilical cord, described in Chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Robert, *Notes*, p. 62.

moment of unawareness, especially amongst children. The ceremony basically consists of a careful and gentle coaxing of the lost element, first catching it, gently bringing it near the patient, making the patient an attractive recipient by rubbing away evil, and then helping this *khon* to re-enter its usual abode. The tying of the wrists may be seen as a measure to prevent the returned *khon* from escaping, giving it an opportunity to become used again to living in the child. The tying of the wrists after *chu malauing* may be seen as a measure preventing the evil which had been removed from the body from returning, ensuring that the body remains in a condition fit to receive the fugitive *khon*.

### **Summoning the vital energy**

Whilst *soon khon* is a woman's ritual whereby the lost *khon* is sought out and placated there is amongst all three Assamese Tai groups which were studied a different ritual to regain a lost *khon*. This ritual, whereby a lost *khon* is summoned back, is presided over by a male ritual specialist. The Khamyang and Khamti call it *hong khon*, and the Phitkey call it *hark khon*. For the *hong khon* ritual nobody may leave the house. On the contrary, during the ceremony the house is closed and nobody is allowed to enter or leave. All water containers have to be filled to the brim, the fireplace has to be cleaned out completely and the cooking pots have to be scoured before the ritual can begin.<sup>7</sup> In the house, near the fireplace a great number of articles are assembled. In the first place there are many weapons, for example bows and arrows, spears, swords, battle-axes and knives. In addition there should be breaking and digging implements, such as crowbars, carpenter's tools, hoes and spades. Also there should be a *hai khao*, or a big rice-steaming pot containing uncooked rice.

A variety of foods has also to be collected and this may be offered at the special house pole (*sao phai lang*, or *sao phai nam*). According to the Khamyang, there is no restriction as to the types of food that may be included: the more dishes the better. Fruits should be included in these offerings. One elderly informant related how a chicken had to be ritually killed with a bamboo knife and that all family members would eat from this sacrifice. It is likely that such sacrifices have been stopped altogether under the influence of Buddhism.

The ritual specialist will recite in a loud voice, either from an ancient document in Shan script or from memory, a lengthy text. Sitting next to the patient and surrounded by the ritual objects, family members and friends, the officiant orders in flowery language each weapon and every tool to go out and search for the missing *khon*. Spears are ordered to poke and threaten, swords are sent out into the world to seek the *khon*, axes may go and break open a coffin in order to see if the missing element is not held there by a corpse, spades and hoes are sent to dig into the earth and help search and bring back the vital spirit. The weapons and implements are sent via the newly laid kitchen fire to begin their imaginary voyage. The

<sup>7</sup> Normally speaking, the ashes of the kitchen fire are not fully removed. The *hong* encountered thus far during which the hearth is completely cleaned out. *Khon* ritual and a burial are the two occasions

official may repeat the invocation seven times before he tests whether he has succeeded to bring back the patient's *khon*.

In order to find out whether the ritual is successful the specialist needs the *hat khao*, or steaming pot, in which a quantity of cooked rice has been put. He folds and squeezes a piece of cloth in the shape of a ball and stirs the ball through the rice grains and gently lifts it out of the pot and out of the pot. The ball of cloth is carefully examined. If the demons have lodged themselves in the folds and come out of the pot, it is a sign that the *khon* has come back. If no rice can be seen, it is still absent. The specialist may try three times, lowering the cloth back into the pot, to test whether the summoning was successful. If he is certain that the *khon* is returned, he will apply egg yolk and tie the patient's wrists in the traditional manner, and give a present and feed him along the lines described above.

Although *soon khon* and *hong khon* are intended to achieve the same goal, the rituals differ considerably. *Hong khon* is basically aggressive, the ritual specialist is in command and orders the tools and weapons to bring back the lost *khon*. *Soon khon*, on the other hand, is characterized by pleading and caressing. The difference may be an indication of a distinction between the attitudes of men and women towards the handling of this specific illness. It demonstrates also how men have traditionally had more opportunity to conduct an elaborate ritual by virtue of their ability to read ancient documents in Shan script.

The difference between *soon khon* and *hong khon* lies mainly in the manner in which the lost *khon* is obtained. The other stages are exactly the same. The two rituals share the following stages:

1. Searching for the lost *khon* and bringing it to the patient
2. Helping the *khon* return to the body.
3. Assisting the *khon* to remain there by tying the wrists and by fortifying the sick person.

Both *soon khon* and *hong khon* are therapeutic rituals both can be enacted if a person shows signs of having lost one or more *khons*. The last stage of these therapeutic ceremonies (the application of egg yolk, tying the wrists and giving good wishes) often occur in a different context, as a concluding part of various other ceremonies. We have already noted that it is done at the end of a *tuk can*, or after the first *hat sraya* ceremony\*. In these instances the ritual is no longer therapeutic. At most it may be described as having a prophylactic effect: it strengthens a person and prevents loss of vitality. The ritual application of yolk (*man khon*) and the actions following this application serve to reassure an individual that he is surrounded by people who have his welfare in mind and who wish him well. Undoubtedly the ritual is conducive to social cohesion and group solidarity.

### The concept *khon*

When asking the Assamese Tai what *khon* exactly means the researcher obtains a variety of answers, such as 'it is something inside you' or 'it is all in you'. A Buddhist monk may feel that the nearest Pali equivalent is

\* Later in this chapter a different divination *khon* of rice technique is described in the ceremony to the

\* See *supra*, Chapter 2.

'vinnana' (principle of conscious life).<sup>10</sup> Others may think of 'soul' or 'spirit', but none of these descriptions provides a satisfactory translation of *khon*. Assamese and English do not seem to have an equivalent term, a fact often encountered with abstract concepts.

It is, however, possible to derive the meaning of *khon* from some of the rituals described above. *Khon* or *khons* belong in the human body, when absent this is immediately clear through a pronounced listlessness and lethargy. By implication, *khon* is antithetical to lethargy. From the manner in which people believe a *khon* to become lost we can deduce that it escapes the body when a person is temporarily out of control of his body. Obvious moments during which a *khon* leaves the body is when a person is frightened 'out of his wits', or when knocked unconscious. A *khon* which has left the body does not disperse, but is believed to attach itself to the nearest living thing: a *khon* is somewhat like a magnetic charge which can be passed on from one object to another. From the manner of placing the collected material on the head of the patient, it is clear that the best way of re-entering the body is found on top of the skull. Nevertheless, the many applications of yolk during *maha khon* indicate that the head is not the only seat of *khon*.

For all these reasons we have translated *khon* as 'element of vitality', or 'quantity of life-force'. It is an extremely important concept amongst the Assamese Tai. We shall see later in this chapter that it is also present in rice, and we will come across the concept again during the death rituals when we note the *taan khon*, the bamboo poles with banners which are erected to help the *khons* of the deceased travel to the land of the dead.

#### **The number of *khons* and their distribution over the body**

The ordinary householder often has but a vague idea about the total number of 'elements of vitality' that a person may house in his body. Some consider they have a single *khon* and others think they have several. Only from the men who possess considerable medical knowledge were specific numbers obtained. Two Peikay men discussed this topic; first vaguely remembered that there were thirty-six *khons*, but upon further reflection lowered the number to thirty-three. The elders of Powai Mukh Khamyang village at first ventured that there must be ninety *khons*, but also that they would like to check this with a man who often conducts *khon* ceremonies and who was absent at that time. Later the researcher had the opportunity to contact this specialist who consulted his informant Tai domineets and announced that altogether there were one hundred and twenty *khon* - forty in the head and ninety in the rest of the body. The tribe Khamat also was asked about the number of *khons* thought that there were thirty-six, but a Khamati village headman without any hesitation expressed the opinion that there were one hundred and twenty of them, thirty in the head and ninety in the body.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For the various shades of meaning of this word, see T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Steele (editors) *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, London: Luzac, 1966, pp. 618-9.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>12</sup> Mr Chaomet Chaolek, Powai Mukh Khamyang Village, 12.1.79.

<sup>13</sup> Mr Chaothii Langnuu, Munlang Village, 13.1.79.

No informant could enumerate a full list of *khons*, but all specialists would mention the top of the head as the most important *khon*. *Khons* may be recognized all over the face, the ears, the eyes, the nose, mouth, cheeks and chin all have their 'elements of vitality'. Over the body, the top of the shoulders was often marked as a place where *khons* can be found, and the elbows, wrists, knuckles, back, hips, knees and ankles are all considered seats of these quantities of life force. The joints of the body are particularly places where a *khon* may be found.

The position of the *khons* is confirmed in the *maat khon* ritual, for it is just at these places that the official presses so many *ekyok* on the body of the patient.

The distribution of *khons* illustrates that the translation of *khon* as 'element of vitality' is quite accurate. The top of the head is the seat of consciousness and the face that is *khon* is considered the principal one reflects an awareness of the fact that the body is controlled to a large extent by the brain. The various spots singled out on the head are all parts which indicate clearly that a person possesses vitality. The ears grow red when a person is excited, the eyes move away whether or not a person is full of zest and the same may be said, to some extent of the mouth, the cheeks and the nose. As for the lower body, the logical points to look for vitality is where movement seems to be most apparent, i.e. at the joints of the body.

The concept *khon* amongst the Assamese Tar people, leads us to the indigenous perception of the human body and its inner workings. The seats of vitality are distributed all over the body. These can be found at the top of the head and scores of lesser 'points' can be found throughout the face and in the joints of the body. The two therapeutic rituals of *som khon* and *hong khon* demonstrate how a stray element of vitality can be induced to return to the human body.

### The *khon* of rice

In the houses of the Assamese Tar we often see a small bundle of rice stalks complete with the ears hanging with the grain downwards as a decoration on the wall. The bundle may be tied together with a bit of red cord, or the lower parts of the stalks may be plaited or rolled together. This bundle is called a *khon khato* or rice's *khon*. The sheaf represents the first sheaf of rice harvested. The day of collecting this first rice is selected with care, it should be an auspicious one. Also the direction in which the person who collects the first rice (usually the oldest woman of the family) sets out must be chosen with the help of astrological knowledge. If for example the subterraneous spirit happens to face the torch that direction has to be avoided by the householder. Arriving at the field the woman may say aloud that she wishes the harvest to be ample so that there will be sufficient to feed the Buddhist monks, to make the village prosperous or any other reasons she may wish to bring forward. The first rice is bound in cloth and carried on the head to the storage room. On the way no word should be uttered.

At the end of the harvest time, a similar small ritual takes place in the most traditional villages of the Assamese Tar. It was so the custom in Powai Makh where the researcher had the chance to observe it. Between the bringing in of the harvest and the time of the Assamese Bihu harvest

festival (half January), the eldest woman of the house will go at dusk to the fields and collect the last grains. There are proper welcoming words uttered whilst collecting the stalks, such as: 'You should not stay out here, so no beasts may find you here, you must not get a shock, come and be welcome in our comfortable and safe storage place'. The collected grain is placed in a clean, preferably new, cloth wrapped and placed on the head. Holding the bundle in its place with the hand the woman walks home. This method of carrying must be regarded as an exceptionally respectful one, for unlike many other peoples, the Tai usually avoid carrying burdens on the head. Again, whilst she walks home she is not allowed to speak to anyone she may meet, and the custom is so well known in the traditional villages that a passer-by would immediately know on what errand the woman is about and would not address her. The last rice is deposited in the rice storage hut and the cloth may be hung on the lintel.

According to informants these rituals are essentially methods of treating the *khon* of rice with gentleness and circumspection. It may help keeping the insect pests out of the storage hut, or the spirits who come in the guise of rats, mice or birds to eat the rice (collectively sometimes called *phu choom kin*). In the ritual for collecting the last rice of the year, the last stalks may have been frightened for the rice could have been eaten by wild animals, left alone the rice may have had a shock. With the help of these rituals the rice's *khon* is made to feel that it is welcome and safe in the rice storage hut.

These rituals are quite simple and straightforward. They serve to illustrate that the Assamese Tai consider rice to have *khon*, and that this *khon* may have the best chance of being retained if the rice is treated ceremonially. The nature and meaning of the rice's *khon* is more clearly brought out in the elaborate *som khon lato*, or catching the rice's *khon* ritual.

An elaborate *som khon khao* is only held when a family feels that their rice's *khon* is abnormally weak. This may occur in poor quality harvests or by abnormalities such as a severe plague of insects. The ritual is presided over by a ritual specialist. It takes place next to the threshing floor or on the verandah of the rice storage house. The whole family gathers there and they have brought along food dishes and many kinds of fruits. One Khamyang informant thought that these should be rice-wine and meat or fish, and that this was first offered to Brahma-deva, the earth goddess, whom he also recollects as Mumukhara. The central ritual object, however, is a big rice container; some thought it must be a *tang* basket, but others used a *cuk* container. This container is filled with rice up to the brim, carefully levelled off and covered by a new piece of cloth. The officiant then proceeds to recite an ancient *som khon* text, usually he reads it from a Tu manuscript in his possession. The full text recorded at Powai Mukh took a little over ten minutes to read aloud.

After the recitation the officiant gently pulls the cloth aside and it is noticed with great interest whether or not any rice grains are spilling out of the container during the process of removing the cloth. If there is rice found next to the bowl after the cloth has been removed it is a certain sign that there was a slight increase in the volume of rice and that the *khon* has returned and the ritual has been successful. If no rice falls out the *khon* is still absent and it is up to the specialist to repeat the recitation or suggest

different measures. This method of divination reminds us of the lowering of a cloth ball in the steaming pot with rice, described for the *hong khon* ritual earlier in this chapter.

At the end of the ritual, the food is eaten by all family members and friends present. The rice which has been used in the central container and which has demonstrated its medicinal properties, is dishressed and cooked. Only members of the household may eat from that rice.

From these three agricultural rites it can be inferred that rice is selected specifically because they are connected with the rice's *khon* it is clear that the Assamese Tai generally accept the idea of rice possessing the quality of *khon*. Just like the human *khon* it is considered to be a protective force which may be lost through an accident or a natural calamity. Just like a person who has lost a *khon* is brought in the middle of the family group and is pampered and made to feel that everybody is concerned with his welfare, thus a pot of rice is placed in the centre of the family group and through the ancient text read out by a woman it is expected that the rice will regain its strength and vitality.

Just like the *soon khon*, the gentle carrying home of the rice *khon* can best be done by a woman. All informants also agreed that rice itself can be regarded as feminine. The rice's *khon* rituals illustrate the pre eminent position of rice as a nourishing force. Rice is the Tai farmer's wealth and a full storehouse means a year of security.

### **Chu malaung or cet khot**

During the *soon khon* ritual which was described at the beginning of the chapter *chu malaung*, was mentioned a therapeutic wiping of the hand palms in order to draw out evil from the body. In the Phakey village of Nampitkey an elaborate version of *chu malaung* was encountered. This elaborate version is used when a person has a severe oppressed feeling in the stomach, or similar symptoms which may point to gastric trouble. The ritual specialist may decide that some negative outside force has settled in the affected part of the body and that an elaborate *chu malaung* is necessary.

For this ritual a basket on a stand, called *chot sia*, has to be prepared. Inside the basket a variety of good gifts have to be deposited. There may be rice, meat or fruit. The exact ingredients and manner of preparation have to be decided by the ritual specialist who takes into account the exact nature of the symptoms as well as astrological data. When the basket has been prepared the officiant will sit close by the prostrate patient and gently move the basket in a circular motion over the affected part. Meanwhile he says in a clear voice words to this effect:

Whose *malaung* it is I do not know, but to this *malaung* I present the following gifts. [Here follows a full enumeration of the contents of the basket]. Please accept all these gifts, eat them and go away.

Then he stands over the patient and slowly draws the basket from the patient's chest to the toes. This act is meant to give an outlet for the evil *malaung* out of the body through the feet. The gesture is repeated seven times, and each drawing is counted aloud until the number seven is reached.

Both the shortened version of *chu malauing* and the elaborate *chu malauing* illustrate yet another aspect of the traditional perception of the human body, namely that unwanted and evil forces can be drawn into the extremities and pulled out of the fingers and toes.

Whilst there is ample evidence of rituals regarding the *khons* amongst other Tai-speaking groups and peoples surrounding the Tai,<sup>11</sup> there are but a few clear parallels of *chu malauing* amongst the therapeutic practices described for the Tai in general. In general terms *chu malauing* fits in the description of the expulsion of '*Phi*' (spirit) by gentle means amongs the Black Tai.<sup>12</sup>

In order to expel *Phi* in a gentle manner one must apply against that part of the body where the *Phi* has established itself an object to which the *Phi* is attracted (flowers, leaves, meat, fruit, rice). As soon as the *Phi* smells the object he leaves the body of the patient in order to take possession of it and then one simply throws the object away, outside the village.

Traditional doctors in Thailand sometimes perform a therapeutic ritual which they call *sak kham*. They mould a piece of clay in the shape of a doll and wrap some cloth from the patient around that doll. Phya Anuman Rajadhon gives the details:<sup>13</sup>

A square tray is made of banana stems half a foot in length. Bamboo splints are inserted into the bottom of the tray and a banana leaf is placed over the top. The doll is then placed on the tray together with boiled rice and other foods heaped around... This tray is brought to the sick person and moved round and round over his head... Perhaps exorcism will be resorted to if the evil spirit is a particularly stubborn one. In some cases the tray is placed by the sick person's feet and the performer of the rite gently beats the patient with a branch of camphor plant from his head down to his feet. Immediately after this he takes the tray away and leaves the house. At the same time, the inmates of the house close all the doors and windows. One of them bears the tray far from the house and leaves it at a place where three roads (or paths) meet; or the tray is floated away along a tidal creek or river.

Near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand the tray is called *satiuine* and a similar ritual is performed there to expel evil spirits, and the *sai kabut* ritual itself has been found in various other places of Thailand, including the far south.<sup>14</sup>

The Tai of Phae near Chiang Mai may be regarded to represent the Yuan tradition, and the Tai living at the far southern end of Thailand also may be regarded as representing one of the Tai groups, so that we can state that these expulsion rituals have been recorded amongst Assamese Tai, Yuan, Thai, Tai of southern Thailand and Black Tai of northern Vietnam. It seems a sufficient spread to warrant the opinion that we are here on the spur of an Ancient Tai therapeutic ritual whereby sickness is tempted to leave the body by using a tray with offerings probably accompanied by incantations and manipulations of the spirit doctor. Having collected the evil from either head or feet of the patient the tray is disposed of outside the village.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> P.B. Latont, 'Pratiques magiques des Thaï noirs du Laos de l'ouest' *Anthropos*, Volume, 54, 1959, p. 832.

<sup>13</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, 'The Ex-

pulsion of Evil Spirits' in *Five Papers on Thai Custom*, Date Panel No. 78, Ithica: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1958, pp. 5-8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

### Therapeutic tattooing

Amongst the middle-aged and older men, occasionally one is found with a small tattoo, usually on the right arm, on the inner side, between elbow and wrist. Only in one case was a man observed to have a tattoo on the left arm, in the same position below the elbow, and only a single case was reported of a woman carrying a tattoo on her arm. The designs are rather simple and straightforward and of considerable variety. Some have a number, often in Burmese others carry a small decoration such as a flower motif. The tattoo usually covered approximately one square inch of skin. Invariably the person who carries the tattoo could relate how it had been made for therapeutic reasons. A ritual specialist had made the tattoo either to cure a person of some complaint, or to prevent someone from contracting a disease. The ages at which the tattoo was took place varied from as young as 6 years to an age of 32 or 33. The custom was found amongst all three groups of Assamese Tais studied. One Kharayan man related how his small boy companion had not been able to prevent him from getting an outbreak of boils all over his body, and a Burmese specialist was called in who put some medicine in the ink and tattooed a number on his arm.

These tattoos on the inner arm do not appear to be 'typically Tai'. Although many Tai villages have a tradition of tattooing the inner arm does not feature prominently in their body decorations. Nor does the medicinal aspect seem to be dominant among the tattoos of Tai or of old Assam.

Quite a different picture was outlined when Assamese Tai were questioned regarding tattoos they may have seen on their parents or grandparents. It soon became clear that there once was a much richer tradition which has been abandoned many years ago. One Kharayan elder recalled that in his grandfather's time there were people who were tattooed on the chest as well as on the inside of both arms with animal designs such as elephants, buffaloes, pigs, frogs, tigers and lions. He thought that the specialist who made the tattoos first drew the pattern on the skin before executing it. There were two types of needles, one with four or five prongs close together, and another which consisted of a hollow tube which ended in a very sharp end. The elaborate tattoos carried a power called *lumpi-thaupi*, which made the wearer of the tattoos invulnerable. Only men were allowed to receive tattoos which had *lumpi-thaupi*.

A Phakey man could recall that in a previous generation men had tattoos on various parts of the body. On the chest there were pyramids with numbers and letters and on the leg he recalled seeing body having the picture of a ghost holding a sword. These tattoos were *thaupi*, they conferred invulnerability. The picture of the ghost was reputedly effective in warding off attacks by ghosts. This informant also mentioned that men could have a single spot tattooed on the tongue or on top of the head and this tattoo, by virtue of the strong medicine in the ink, would confer invulnerability. A spot tattooed on wrist or ankle would ensure that a serpent would not bite.

It was the opinion of a Khamti village chief that in olden days the Khamti men were tattooed all over. He could remember only two patterns, a fish on the arm and an elaborate fish-scale pattern over the hips and legs. The latter he called *ket paakhaam*.

On the subject of *luupii-thaapii*, or *thaapii*, there were many stories. Some of the Tai freedom fighters who resisted the British occupation during the nineteenth century reputedly possessed *luupii-thaapu*. Even when Manirandowan, one of these fighters, was captured and the British wanted to hang him, the hanging was unsuccessful, the rope broke through his magical *luupii-thaapu*. It was only when an informer told the British how to destroy a man's invulnerability, namely by touching him with a portion of a woman's lower cloth, that the hanging could take place. Until today the Khamyang men are strictly forbidden to walk under a woman's lower garment, and when a woman hangs her *mekhala* (Assamese word for a woman's wrap) to dry she should take care that even its shadow does not fall on a path where men may tread. The reason for this avoidance is that a woman's cloth may occasionally be soiled with menstrual blood and this is considered antithetical to the powers of *luupii-thaapii*.

*Luupii-thaapu* is, amongst the Assamese Tai, considered to be a Burmese word. It denotes a state of magical power which is not without danger. If you have a little too much of this power it is likely to send you berserk and a Phakey informant said that when people were invested with the power, either through tattooing or by metal objects inserted under the skin, there should be some banana tree trunks kept handy for the person who suddenly feels the urge, so that he can rush at the trunk and slash away until his rage subsides. If the frenzy does not calm down, an immediate cure lies in touching the man with a cloth which has been used to collect a woman's menstrual flow.

In Borkhamti Gaon the words *luupii-thaapii* were not encountered. Instead people referred to *tupii-thaapu*. Here it was also asserted that these words were Burmese. According to these Khamtis the word *pii* refers specifically to invulnerability, and the words *tui* and *thaau* to the things to which people were immune. Thus *tupii* was held to mean 'invulnerable to lashing', *thaapu* 'invulnerable to the bush knife', and even a third type was mentioned, namely *ngapu* 'invulnerable to bites'. The Borkhamti Gaon villagers remember the tattooing traditions very clearly and in fact it was ascertained that it has not yet completely been abandoned. Besides tattooing on the lower inner arm, a very heavy and dark tattooing on the thighs was mentioned, the latter made up of a pattern with 'black pictures'. The tattooing was first applied when a young man was ready to go to war. Women were not tattooed.

If a tattoo is losing its protective power, one Phakey man assures us, an intolerable itch develops and a man may feel compelled to scratch himself until blood is drawn. In order to stop the itching there is a traditional recipe, according to which the leaves of thorny creeper, known by the name *mahaaynum*, the leaves of which 'tremble', should be collected and boiled. When cooled off they can be made into a poultice.

These legends and stories of the past demonstrate that the tattooing tradition was once very strong amongst the Assamese Tai. There are varying reports of tattoos, ranging from a dot on the top of the head or on the ankles to elaborate designs on chest, arms and legs. All these tattoos are connected with beliefs in magical power which confers invulnerability.

Tattooing has been described for many Tai groups outside Assam and it is interesting to note the places on the body, the designs and accompanying

beliefs in order to make a judgement on the possible relationship between Assamese customs described above and those of their distant relatives in other parts of Asia.

Bastian visited a Shan tattooer in the 1860s and reports two types of tattoos, the ordinary black ones which were supposed to be men had to have and the secret ones which were not. All the man who was at that moment being tattooed had his hands held which were filled up with various letters. The latter type of tattooing was used to make the wearer invisible and to ensure that he was thereby warded off illness and other misfortune.<sup>18</sup>

The Shan of Nambon in 1862, Burma, had elaborate designs reserved for males only. These would consist of a tattoo on the arm or on the tip of the toe, or they were used in pairs. As a rule men covered both legs with designs descending from waist to the knee and sometimes even further down to the ankles. The backs were seldom tattooed, though an occasional pattern might be added after the legs were fully covered. Whilst the leg designs were symmetrical and artistic, the ones on the back had no symmetry. Sometimes a design of squares, with a letter in each, may occupy the space under one shoulder-blade, while the other side of the back is perhaps decorated with small circles or weird beasts or birds.<sup>19</sup>

In his description of Burmese tattooing, Scott remarks:<sup>20</sup>

The Shans tattoo even more extensively than the Burmans. The figures are carried down well over the calf of the leg and above the navel, while from the upper line tattooed rays run up to the chest and at the back, after the fashion of a rising sun, almost to the nape of the neck. Sometimes the retainers of the Sawbhais, or Shan chiefs, had every part of the body except the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet tattooed. Even the face was covered with the dark-blue markings. Mostly all the men who tattoo charms and amuletistic figures are Shan. They claim and are allowed a special skill in such matters, and as they mutter spells and incomprehensible incantations over the 'medicine', are looked up to with profound belief and a very considerable deal of awe.

Amongst the Lue men, the custom prevails of tattooing the legs. They believe this operation entails bravery and courage. Le May remarks, however, that the Lue originally did not have this custom and that they have copied the custom from the Shan and the Lao people.<sup>21</sup> However, Chiang mentions the Lue custom of tattooing from knee to navel as a traditional custom. Without these markings no man could successfully court a Lue girl.<sup>22</sup>

In northern Thailand, the tattooing of thighs and belly was once a common practice for all males.<sup>23</sup> Krishn reported in 1960 that nearly all

<sup>18</sup> A. Bastian, *Die Völker des Oestlichen Asiens*, Vol. II, Reisen in Birma in den Jahren 1861-1862, Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1866, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> Shway Yoe (J. G. Scott), *The Burman, His Life and Notions*, New York: Norton, 1963, pp. 41-2; see also his *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, Pt. I, Vol. II, pp. 80-1.

<sup>21</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> Chiang, as quoted by Lebar, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 213. See also P.B Lafont, 'Le That de Muong-Sing', *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises*, N.S. Volume XXXII, Pt. 1, 1957, p. 47, footnote 38.

<sup>23</sup> J. E. de Young, *Village Life in Modern Thailand*, Berkeley: University of California, 1955, p. 45.

men over fifty had their thighs tattooed from above the knee to just below the waist,<sup>24</sup> and he quotes a Thai author:<sup>25</sup>

From the waist to the thighs they were likely to be tattooed completely black... on the back, on the chest and on the arms, that tattooing was in the form of Lanathai letters, pictures of animals or astrological tables, which were held to protect the wearer from physical harm on those parts of the body.

For central Thailand, there is one seventeenth century report of the remarkable tattooed 'trousers'. De la Loubère saw a eunuch whose legs were 'blued with a dull blue, like that mark which the gunpowder leaves'<sup>26</sup> Those that showed him it informed him that it was something.<sup>27</sup>

... affected by the great men, that they had more or less blue according to their dignity; and that the King of Siam was blu'd from the sole of his feet, to the hollow of his stomach. Others assur'd me that it was not out of grandeur, but superstition; and others would make me doubt whether the king of Siam was blue. I know not how it is.

Whilst there is thus clear evidence for the leg-and-thigh tattoo being known at the Ayutthaya court, it appears to have been discontinued for no other sources connect it with central Thailand. On the other hand, there are some reports of men's chests, upper arms and backs carrying tattooed designs. Some of these designs are geometrical patterns, some are animal figures, each surrounded by decorative letters in Cambodian script. Quite popular in these central Thai tattoos are sentences in this script which was traditionally reserved for sacred matters.<sup>28</sup> This type of tattooing is strongly associated with ideas of invulnerability, it will cause arms to misfire, the magical powers to cause hostile objects to deflect and miss the wearer and even when a weapon hits the body it will prevent the skin from breaking.<sup>29</sup>

However, historical sources do not mention this tattooing on the upper part of the body as a custom prevalent in central Thailand. Pallegoix, who mentions the beliefs in invulnerability,<sup>30</sup> and who has reported on tattooing habits of groups to the north and northeast<sup>31</sup> has no word on the custom in central Thailand. Anuman Rajadhon notes that it is particularly amongst the lower class people that the custom of tattooing the chest and back occurs.<sup>32</sup> Through an analysis of the designs and weighing of some historical evidence, I have argued elsewhere that the tattooing custom has probably been introduced relatively recently to central Thailand and that its origin seems to lie in the northeastern region of Thailand and Laos.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>24</sup> K. Kingshill, *Ku Daeng-The Red Tomb: A Village Study in Northern Thailand*, Chiangmai: The Prince Royal's College, 1960, p. 217.

<sup>25</sup> Bun Chuaj Si-sawad, *Thirty Tribes In Chiangrai*, quoted in Kingshill *Ku Daeng*, p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> De la Loubère, *The Kingdom of Siam*, p. 27

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>28</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, pp. 82-94.

<sup>29</sup> R. B. Textor, *An Inventory of Non-Buddhist Supernatural Objects in a Central*

*Thai Village*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1960, pp. 102-5.

<sup>30</sup> A. Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai ou Siam*, Farnborough, Gregg, Volume II, 1969, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume I, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Thai Literature and Swasdi Raksa*, Thailand Culture Series, No. 3, Bangkok: The National Culture Institute, 1953, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> B. J. Terwiel, 'Tattooing in Thai History', *The Nation Review* (Bangkok), October 9, pp. 6-7.

Laotian tattooing has received considerable attention in the literature. Pallegoix distinguished between 'Lao-Phangdam' and 'La-Phungkhaō', or Laotians who have a black (tattooed) belly and Laotians with a white (free of tattooing) belly. He was well aware that with the expression 'Phungdān' was meant a general tattooing of the legs and thighs as well as the belly, so as to form tattooed 'trousers'. Amongst the peoples who fall under this heading he mentions those people wearing the colors of Chiengsaat, Luaphan, Lampanz, Patue and Nan - in other words peoples that may better be described as Tai Yuan. Amongst those who are free of the tattooed 'trousers' he mentions the Tai of Muang Lom and Luang Prabang, apparently Laotians 'proper'. The latter, according to Pallegoix abhor tattooing.<sup>34</sup>

It should be understood, however, that Pallegoix was not as familiar with Laotians as he was with the peoples of central Thailand. Later, more detailed research proves that, although the distinction between 'black' and 'white' Laotians is indeed a native classification related to the 'black' ones having tattooed trousers, but that the 'white' Laotians by no means shun other types of tattooing. Moreover, the peoples who tattoo their legs can be found well represented amongst the Laotians 'proper'.

The fact that tattooing of the legs was quite common during the nineteenth century in Laos is clear from general accounts and travel reports. Gosselin reports:<sup>35</sup>

On both banks of the Mekong river, men are tattooed from the waist to halfway down the calf. These complicated tattoos are deep blue or sometimes dark red. They are of various types, but in general they repeat many times a dragon of Annamite, or maybe Burmese style. At a certain distance the undressed Laotian appears to be dressed in one of those tight trousers which we in Europe use in our cold bath institutions. It appears that this type of tattooing is very ancient...

The most detailed studies of Laotian tattooing are probably those of Nguyen-Xuan-Nguyen and Levi.<sup>36</sup> The latter made a close study of the tattooed 'trousers' and classified them under four categories, according to the manner of decoration:<sup>37</sup>

1. The whole pattern is made up of 'fish-scales'.
2. The 'trousers' are a network of diamonds and rectangles.
3. It is composed of framed pictures with figures of animals inside.
4. No discernible pattern, but a combination of squares, triangles, circles and other magical figures.

The classification is repeated here, for unwittingly Levi provides us with a detail which seems strikingly similar to what the Khant, village headman

<sup>34</sup> Pallegoix, *Description du royaume thai*, Volume I, p. 35. The tattooed 'Laotians' who were described by Bock apparently also come from the Tai Yuan region. See C. Bock, 'Le tatouage au Laos occidental', *Revue d'ethnographie*, Volume 3, 1884, pp. 259-61 and his *Temples and Elephants, the Narrative of a Journey of Exploration Through Upper Siam and Lao*, London: Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1884, pp. 170-4.

<sup>35</sup> C. Gosselin, *Le Laos et le protectorat français*, Paris: Perrin, 1900, p. 171.

<sup>36</sup> Nguyen-Xuan-Nguyen, 'Contribution à l'étude des tatouages au Laos', *Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme*, Volume IV, 1941, pp. 99-111 and P. Levi, 'Les tatouages laotiens', *Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme*, Volume IV, 1941, pp. 113-118.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

related regarding an elaborate fish-scale pattern on the legs and torso, called *ket paiknum*. A professional tattooer in central Laos, describing Laoian tattooing, drew a similar pattern, but called it *faeng mami*, or 'toad bubbles'.<sup>37</sup> Laoian tattooing appears to fall into two general types, namely the heavy tattoos on legs and torso on the one hand in that a variety of syllables, animal pictures and designs are on the chest, back and torso on the other. The first type appears more related to a male initiationrite, the second appears largely a matter of obtaining invulnerability. Women rarely carry a tattoo, and in the few cases recorded it is not more than a few dots of colour.

Amongst the Phuthai who appear to have migrated from northeastern Laos and northwestern Vietnam to various spots in Laos and north-eastern Thailand, we have a report that all men tattoo their legs from above the knee to the waist on both sides. The Phuthai women also are reported to have tattoos, but these are limited to decorations on stomach and wrists.<sup>38</sup> Almost all the women tattoo their stomachs and their wrists with patterns of rice flowers, other flowers or leaves.<sup>39</sup>

The Tai Neua men are also fond of tattooing, albeit in a less dramatic fashion than the Laoian. On their calves they like to have a picture of a dragon, which they call *po-mor* and just under each this dragon a design in the shape of a zig-zag pattern encircles the leg.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, none of the description of Red, White and Black Tai mentions a tattooing custom, and no reference could be found in the descriptions of the eastern groups.

The Tai in China have long been associated with tattooing customs. The Hou Han Shu, describing the Ai-lao people, begins with 'All the people belonging to this tribal stock engrave and paint their bodies with dragon-like designs'. It has been argued above that the Ai-lao are unlikely to have been people of Tai stock. In addition unfortunately the text does not make clear with which methods the engraving took place, on which parts of the body this could be noticed, nor whether it was practised among certain sections of the society only. Similar vague connections between tattooing and Tai peoples can be drawn from later sources, but none providing us with the detail required to establish likely patterns.<sup>41</sup>

The evidence brought together here regarding the Tai and tattooing establishes that there appear two distinct tattooing traditions amongst many Tai, one encompassing the upper part of the body and using a variety of designs, the other the densely tattooed 'trouser' pattern. The Assamese Tai can recall both traditions. Khamyang and Phakey describe a tradition which falls clearly in the first category, whilst the Khamti remarks clearly point to a 'trouser' design. Having made plausible that the Assamese Tai have these aspects in common with other Tai, we cannot state with certainty

<sup>37</sup> 'Aacaan Nguan, Wat Saancaw, personal communication, 1 October 1968.

<sup>38</sup> E. Seidenfaden, 'Regarding the Customs, Manners, Economics and Languages of the Kha(So) and Puthai Living in Ampho' Kutchinari, Changvat Kalasindhu, Monthon Roi Et', *Journal of the Thailand Research Society*, Vol. 34, Pt. 2, Sep. 1943, p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 356.

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to Dr R. R. C. de Crespiigny for making available his translation of relevant portions of the Hou Han Shu.

<sup>41</sup> See for example the remarks of Li Chi, *The Formation of the Chinese People*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928, pp. 256-8.

that they have carried this tradition as part of their Tai-ness. In the first place it should be noted that the tattooing tradition is not universal amongst the Tai. There are relatively few Siamese who follow the custom, and if the tradition is known at all amongst the Tai of Vietnam it is so unobtrusive as to have escaped the notice of the chroniclers. The evidence for souther China is inconclusive. The tattooed classes are classes in a broad belt ranging from southern Laos to upper Burma. However, the literature of surrounding peoples indicates that the extent of the belt is to the southward into Cambodia, where the Khmers have a custom of tattooing the upper body, and on the Burmese and the castes of tattooing both legs and upper body are found widespread amongst the Burmese.

The tattooing of the upper part of the body seems to be ancestral designs, mystical diagrams and script letters - associated with magical protection against weapons. It is possible that it spread in southeast Asia with armies and warfare and that it is therefore not necessarily bound to an ethnic group. Some unidentified region east of the upper Irrawaddy, seems to have had the custom at the end of the thirteenth century A.D., because Marco Polo describes for the inhabitants of the city of Cangigu (or Caugigu):<sup>48</sup>

The whole of the people, or nearly so, have their skin marked with the needle in patterns representing lions, dragons, birds and what not, done in such a way that it can never be obliterated. This work they cause to be wrought over face and neck and chest, arms and hands, and belly; in short the whole body; and they look on it as a token of elegance in that those who have the largest amount of this embroidery are regarded with the greatest admiration.

The 'trouser' pattern appears less connected with invulnerability and seems to be more related to a 'rite de passage' of young males. It seems less likely to be easily transferred from one ethnic group to another. Various Tai seem to be pre-eminent in this type of tattooing and although the possibility of borrowing from the Burmese cannot be excluded, the evidence brought together here points rather to the opposite.

<sup>48</sup> H. Yule, (translator and editor) *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, John Murray, 1903, p. 117. Vol. II, London:

## 4

## KHON CEREMONIES IN WIDER CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of Chapter 3 the Assamese Tai ceremonies of collecting *khons* and restoring these 'elements of vitality' to people and to rice have been described in some detail. This chapter is devoted to an overview of similar customs amongst other Tai communities and to the question of which aspects may be regarded as 'typically Tai'.

### PART I: ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY

#### **The Ahom people**

Moving over the Tai peoples from west to east, we first have to consider evidence of ceremonies to restore vitality amongst the Ahom, the people who preceded the Khamtis, Khamyang and Phakey into Assam and who gradually lost much of their Tai culture. In some versions of the ancient Ahom annals written in Ahom script, a ceremony *rik khwan*, or sometimes *rik khan* is often mentioned.<sup>2</sup> *Rik* means 'to call' in the Ahom language,<sup>3</sup> and *khwan* or *khan* seems related to the Assamese Tai word *khon*, which we have translated as 'vitality'. In the annals the ceremony of *rik khwan* is described as one to gain new life, or to obtain longevity, and there are many separate occasions during which a *rik khwan* ceremony can be held as a State Ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

End of December 1978 I had the opportunity to visit a village in the Sibsagar district of Assam where many people of Ahom descent live and where some older inhabitants have knowledge of some archaic Ahom traditions. One of these elderly men described the Ahom ceremony of *rik khwan* for an ordinary person. It is performed when a person has had a severe shock or fright. The *khwan* is collected in a fishing basket in which there must also be a duck's egg, a fistful of rice, a pair of betel nuts and some fruits, such as bananas. This basket is held over the head of the person who has been frightened and a short chant in the Ahom language takes place. This informant stated that no tying of thread takes place at the end of the ritual.<sup>5</sup>

Another version of *rik khwan* is reported for the nearby village of Moranjan by Indira Barua. It is performed for the welfare of the family,

<sup>1</sup> Much of the evidence presented in this chapter was presented in a paper 'The Tai's and Their Belief in Khwans' during the Xth International Congress of Anthropological Sciences in New Delhi and at the International Seminar on Folk Culture in Cuttack, in December 1978, and submitted for publication in the *South East Asian Review*.

Bimal, *Ahomi-Buragi*, p. 16 ff  
Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, p. 122 and p. 290.

<sup>2</sup> Barua, *Deen Borojuri, prision*  
Jayanta Phukan, Patsaku village, 31/12/78.

It takes place in a corner of the compound and amongst the necessary articles she mentions chicken, eggs, banana, areca nut, betel leaves, powdered rice and boiled rice. A few pages later in the same book she describes the ritual of *ajn tolta* (Assamese, ritual to procure longevity), in which the soul of a child which has been frightened is implored to return.<sup>6</sup> From this description of *ajn tolta* as well as descriptions of other variants, notably by Padmeswar Gogoi who tells of Ahom priests catching a fish and holding it above the heads of bride and groom,<sup>7</sup> it is quite clear to this researcher that *ajn tolta* is nothing else but a specific type of *rik khwan*. It appears that the Ahoms have divided *rik khwan* up into an elaborate form still known by its original name and that much simpler forms were given this Assamese designation.

### Shan

Apart from the material presented in Chapter 3, there is virtually no information on the Shan and possible beliefs in 'elements of vitality'. Seidenfaden makes a general statement that the Shan, like the Laotians, believe in a plurality of souls or 'khwans', and that they recognized thirty-two of them.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Phya Anumit lists the Shan as one of the Tai peoples who believe that a *khwan* can take flight and thereby cause a person to become ill.<sup>9</sup>

### The Lue

The Lue believe that one or more of their 'khwans' can leave the body and enter that of a different person, thus causing sickness.<sup>10</sup> Dodd records an anecdote about a set of clothing purchased from a Lue woman which illustrates some of the beliefs regarding the 'khwans'. The husband of the woman in question came to ask Dodd for the return of the clothing since some of the thirty-two *khwans* had adhered to it and the woman had developed a fever. Dodd was unwilling to give the articles back but eventually let the man cut off some threads in the hope that the stray *khwan* would adhere to them.<sup>11</sup>

The most detailed statement about the Lue and their *khwans* can be found in an article by Rispaud. *Khwan*, he translates as 'vital spirit' and their number corresponds to the number of organs, fluids and fundamental elements of the body. The Lue recognize sixty-two of them, thirty-two in the front of the body, and thirty in the back. When a person has fallen sick and it is feared that a *khwan* is astray, a single egg, or a combination of an egg, rice and a kauri shell can be used in order to divine the exact whereabouts of the lost 'vital spirit', and afterwards a ceremony of recalling this spirit can be held. This is called *hong khwan*, which can take place by flattering and coaxing the *khwan* or by giving sacrifices to the evil spirit who

<sup>6</sup> *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, p. 93, p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Padmeswar Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, Gachha Publication Board, Assam, 1976, pp. 70-71.

<sup>8</sup> Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Dodd, *The Tai Race*, p. 177.

has taken possession of the *m* *wang* element. Finally a white thread is bound around the wrists of the patient to ensure that the *khwans* will remain in their proper place.<sup>2</sup> A 'tal' remark which illustrates the Lue ideas about *khwans* is found in a description of housebuilding. The most important pillar of the house is called *sa-an-p* *dat*, and when it is erected it is offered presents which must be tied to the post with white thread.<sup>18</sup>

### The Nua

Seidenfaden lumps Lue and Nua together in his summary remark regarding *khwans*.<sup>19</sup> Dodd provides a few more details which indicate the existence of a 'summoning ritual'.<sup>20</sup>

When it is discovered that any one's *kwan*, or more of them, have acquired bad habits of wandering and giving the neighbours trouble, the spirit doctor goes through an incantation supposed to bring home the wanderer. Then strings are tied around the wrists, and often the ankles too, to keep the vagrant *kwan* at home.

### The Yuan

Probably the earliest reference to a *khwan* ritual is found in the Chiangmai Chronicles. During the thirteenth century, one month after the birth of Mengrai a *khwan* ceremony was held. Later that same century, a *khwan* ritual which had been improperly performed caused severe friction between various nobles.<sup>21</sup>

Chotisukharat, a specialist on Yuan ritual, has described a ceremony of calling back the *khwan* which is called *hoong khwan*. It takes place if a person through a severe fright has lost one or more of his thirty-two *khwans*. There is a ritual container, rice, a banana, and a boiled egg. A ritual specialist reads for 10-15 minutes from a text in which the *khwan* is asked to return to the body of the patient. Then the officiant binds white cotton thread around the wrists, the left side first which symbolizes the return of the *khwan* and then the right side, which symbolizes a forcing the *khwan* to remain in the body. Whilst binding, good wishes are made. Some people wear the threads for three days, but others may keep them there for such a long period that they may turn quite black.<sup>22</sup>

### The Thai of central Thailand

*Khon* rituals have long formed part of the Siamese culture. In the famous poem *Khun Chaeng-Khuan Phrao*, written in the first half of the nineteenth

Rivaud, 'Sur une tribu des communes siamoises', pp. 75-63.

<sup>18</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 178. Le May translates *khwan* as 'life'. See p. 180 where the text is given in Thai.

<sup>19</sup> Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Dodd, *The Tai Race*, p. 177.

C. Not. 33. *Annales T. S. en Chine et le Vieng Mat*, Volume III. Paris: Geuthner, 1932, pp. 20-1 and p. 30.

*Sa-guan Chotisukha, i.e., Propheci Tha Phugnat, Bangkok: Ideon State, 1960, pp. 266-7.*

century and which depicts rural life during the Ayutthaya period, many references are made to *khwan* rituals, and it is clear that a *khwan* ceremony not only was held to help restore a person who had undergone a shock, but also that it formed part of formal life-cycle events.<sup>19</sup> Pallegoix also notes how the ritual forms part of 'rites-de-passage'.<sup>20</sup>

The simplest therapeutic *khwan* ceremony for central Thailand has been described by Phya Anuman Rajadhon. He records that when a child comes home distraught after a fall or a scare, the mother may run out immediately with a ladle, a bowl and a piece of cloth towards the spot where the incident occurred. Calling out for the child's *khwan*, the mother scoops up what she believes to be the *khwan*, puts it in the bowl and covers the bowl with the cloth. The bowl is passed round and round over the child's head, enabling its *khwan* to recognize its usual abode. Cotton thread is tied around each wrist and the child receives a blessing and sometimes a present.<sup>21</sup>

In the more elaborate *khwan* ceremonies of Thailand, a ritual container is used, often made of folded banana leaf, filled with cooked rice. On top of the container a shelled hard-boiled duck's egg is pinned into place with a sliver of wood. Surrounding the rice and egg will be more pieces of folded banana leaf and small offerings of banana and sweetmeats. The elaborate *khwan* ritual in Thailand has three sets of lighted candles go around the ritual specialist and his charge, and the text which is chanted by the officiant may be very lengthy. A ritual feeding of the person whose *khwan* is called also forms part of the elaborate ceremony. Just before the tying with cotton thread around the wrists takes place the arms may be brushed lengthwise three times from shoulder to fingertips, in order to take away impurities and undesirable things. Afterwards gifts are presented by those who bound the wrists.<sup>22</sup>

The concept *khwan* in central Thailand is, just like amongst all other Tai groups thus far encountered, an invisible element which is supposed to reside in a living person's body. If a *khwan* leaves the body the person affected will become ill. In a wider sense, the concept is used with respect to a variety of important animals and objects. An elephant and a buffalo have a *khwan*, and also rice, the main house post, a ship, a bullock cart, a city, an artist's tools and his musical instruments.<sup>23</sup> Some authors translate the term as 'guardian spirit', or 'soul', but a careful reading of the *khwan* ceremonies indicates that primarily a notion of 'life-force', or 'element of vitality' adheres to the word. When a person is dejected or lethargic the Thai say '*khwan han*' or: 'his life-force has disappeared'.

Thai people can assign a *khwan* to specific parts of the body, such as the eyes, the mouth or the hands. However, the number of body parts which are readily assigned a vitality of their own is relatively small.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Seepiat Rueng Khun Cherie Khan Phaen*, Chabap Hojsamut Hwengchaat, Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1963, p. 8 et passim.

<sup>20</sup> Pallegoix, *Description du royaume Thaï en Siam*, Volume II, pp. 54-6.

<sup>21</sup> Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> For full details, see *Ibid.*, pp. 213-236.

<sup>23</sup> *Pitakarittisorn Chithi Ratchabanditthakan*, Bangkok: The Royal Academy, 1950, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> M. A. Wright, 'Some Observations on Thai Animism', *Practical Anthropology*, Volume 15, 1968, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 207.

Heinze's informants could not list more than six parts of the body where a *khwan* may reside.<sup>18</sup> Efforts by scholars to obtain an exhaustive list of the parts of the body which can be assigned a *khwan* in central Thailand have proved fruitless. The texts used for summoning a person's vitality do not specify other than that person's general *khwan*.<sup>19</sup> In traditional medicine, this general *khwan* seems to be localized in a person's head; in other words, the head contains the seat of animation.<sup>20</sup> The ancient word for the clavicular region of the thorax is *ruak khwan*, the "khwan foundation," and this also suggests that the head may be regarded as the *khwan*'s most important abode.

Sources from the southern region of Thailand indicate that here also the *khwan* rituals are important. In general they prove to be similar to those of central Thailand. Their texts do not mention a specific number of *khwan* but refer only to the general, single concept and do not mention separate parts of the body.<sup>21</sup>

### Northeast Thailand

The most detailed description of the belief in *khwan*s for the northeastern part of Thailand has been given by Tambiah, but others who are familiar with the region also refer to the concept. Klausner writes about his 'living essence' which was called to his body and symbolically bound to it with sacred thread.<sup>22</sup> Cripps writes about the *riak khwan* (calling the *khwan*) ritual which is needed to make people feel secure and confident, to set the mind at peace. 'If they are sick they will recover from disease. Were they afraid or depressed, the *khwan* would be absent; they would waste away.'

Tambiah's villagers explained that when a person is frightened, sick or in trouble, the *khwan* takes flight and may leave the body. This very act of its fleeing the body exposes the *khwan*'s owner to suffering, illness and misfortune.<sup>23</sup> These villagers treat the *khwan* as one entity when they perform the ritual for its recall. Yet they have heard that there are thirty-two separate *khwan*s. Nobody could enumerate them. As in central Thailand, the head is considered the preeminent residence of the *khwan*. Unlike the texts used in central Thailand, the ones of the northeast mention several separate *khwan*s, namely the *khwan* of beauty, of the legs, of the shins, of the eyes, of the eyebrows, of other parts of the face and of the upper part of the

<sup>18</sup> R.-I. Heinze, 'Nature and Function of Some Therapeutic Techniques in Thailand', *Asian Folklore Studies*, Volume 36, Pt. 2, 1977, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Gerini, *Chulakantamangala*, p. 53; Rajadhorn, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 207.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212; H. G. Q. Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies, Their History and Function*, London: Quaritch, 1931, p. 33; Heinze, 'Nature and Function', p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> *Khati Chaobaan Amphoe Sathingphra*

*Amphoe Ranot, Songkhla: Department of Thai Language, Songkhla College of Education*, n.d., pp. 123-6.

<sup>23</sup> W. J. Klausner, *Reflections in a Log Pond*, Bangkok: Suksit Siam, 1974, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> F. Cripps, *The Far Province*, London: Hutchinson, 1965, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, No. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

body.<sup>34</sup> Phya Anuman Rajadhon, who scanned several northeastern texts for this purpose, found separately mentioned *khwans* of the eyes, ears, mouth, nose, hands, intestines and others, but he also was unable to make up the number of thirty-two.<sup>35</sup>

Some interesting ceremonial details recorded by Tambiah during a *khwan* ritual at marriage are a tray with a conical, tiered structure on which are placed a boiled egg, bananas, flowers and a lump of rice. This egg reputedly was held by the groom and bride at the moment of the tying of the white thread around the wrists. The role of the lump of rice and the bananas is not described<sup>36</sup> Tambiah stresses the fact that these food offerings are all purely vegetarian, and that this may be seen as an indication of the fact that the sacred agents involved in the ceremony are 'pure benevolent'. However, from the previous chapter and from the survey of *khwan* rituals already given it is quite clear that the egg is there for a much more fundamental reason, it may be seen as a symbol for the 'element of vitality' itself. Moreover, a sacrifice of a chicken is considered appropriate for *khwan* rituals not only amongst the Tai Lue, as we have noted above, but also amongst many other Tai speakers.

### **The Laotians**

Calling and welcoming the *khwan* (*suu khwan*) is a regularly occurring ceremony amongst the Laotians; it is held at all kinds of circumstances in life, at every important stage of life, at every transition. At birth, a *suu khwan* is held for the mother who leaves the fire, and also for the newly-born. It is renewed on each birthday, for every sickness and even at every frightening event that may have threatened the child. For the adolescent it is held before he enters the monastery, as pupil or novice; it is held before ordination and again after leaving the order. It is done during marriage and at every promotion or change of life.<sup>37</sup>

A tray is prepared with cupped banana leaves, decorated with flowers, and it should also contain alcohol, eggs, cakes, rice, some money, candles and cotton thread. A ritual specialist invites the divinities and then calls the *khwan* from where it may be hiding, mentioning various *khwans* of the thirty-two parts of the body. Then he pronounces good wishes and the wrists of the person for whom the *suu khwan* is held are tied with the cotton thread.<sup>38</sup>

Probably the most authoritative description of the Laotian ritual is given by Zago, who provides many details which take on a special significance in a comparative framework. The tray for the *khwan* carries in the centre a cup in which other cups can be fastened, always an uneven number of cups (three, five or seven). The top one carries some flowers, small candles which will be used for a fire-ceremony and some white cotton

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>35</sup> Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 207.

<sup>36</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, pp. 230-4.

<sup>37</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, pp. 129-30.

On page 129 Zago mentions a considerable number of sources regarding Laotian *khwan* rituals.

<sup>38</sup> Nhousy Abhay, 'The Baci' *Kingdom of Laos* (edited by R. de Berval) Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, pp. 128-131.

threads. On the tray or in the lower cups one can find a boiled chicken egg which is called the *khwan*-egg, little bowls with glutinous rice, sweetmeats, ripe bananas and flowers. Next to the tray are some objects to embellish the person for whom the *khwan* ritual is held: *sak* is a piece of cloth, a comb, a mirror and ornaments. On yet another tray, boiled chicken can be served, as well as a pig's head and some pieces of cowrie. The guests who arrive carry a container with rice, an egg and flowers and place this next to the central tray.

The invitation of the *khwan* is the main part of the ritual. The general pattern of the texts analysed by Zago is an arrangement that it is an auspicious moment, and that all is ready to receive that an invitation to the divinities to be present and lend their assistance: an address to the *khwan* in order to entice this element to come, a list of promises and flatteries, an invitation to the *khwan* to take up its proper abode and finally good wishes of many kinds.<sup>29</sup>

Nguyen-Van-Lanh has given a detailed description of the stages that follow.<sup>30</sup> The man who will attach the cotton thread takes the thread by the middle, letting each half dangle so that it will just touch the wrist which is proffered to him. He then strokes the evil deeds of former lives away, detaches a minute portion of the ends of the thread and throws them to the west, thus getting rid of the evil. He takes the egg, a little bowl of rice, a banana and one of the ornaments and places these in the open hand as a gift to the *khwan* and brings the offering plate near so that the back of the hand comes in contact with the chicken. Then after having attached the thread around the wrist he takes the two ends of the knot between thumb and index finger and rolls them together for about a second, during which he finishes the formula of good wishes which he has been murmuring all through the actions described above.

Later in the same work Nguyen-Van-Lanh describes a simple ceremony held for a child who has become sick after falling in the water, which he calls 'sonne-khouan', or fishing for the *khwan* with a scooping basket. An elderly person goes with a sailing basket, a boiled egg, a bowl of glutinous rice, ten candles of which one is alight, and a container with a set of the child's clothes to the river where the accident took place. There the sailing is plunged in the water and a search is made whilst holding the egg and rice in one hand. Three times the gesture of fishing is made whilst the *khwan* is softly called and encouraged to come. The objects are carried home, the child is dressed with the set of clothes from the basket and the wrists are tied, whilst the egg and rice is held in the child's hand. If the accident took place at a tree, the same ritual takes place at that spot.<sup>31</sup>

The Laotians also believe in a rice-*khwan*, which is invited after the monsoon. The buffalo, the rice cart, a house post and musical instruments are all assigned *khwans*.<sup>32</sup>

As to the number of *khwans* in Laos, the people of Bissac in the south of the country believe that there are thirty-two in the human body, but even

<sup>29</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, pp. 145-150.

<sup>30</sup> Nguyen-Van-Lanh, 'La métapsycose

laotienne et une pratique qui s'y rattache: le sou-khouan', *Bulletin de l'Institut Indo-*

*Chinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme*, Volume 5, 1942, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113-4.

<sup>32</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, p. 142.

the ritual specialists cannot give the complete list.<sup>43</sup> In some of the invocations a large number of separate *khwan*s are mentioned and these give us an idea of the type of body parts to which a separate *khwan* may be assigned. On one occasion we encounter *khwan*s for head, eyelashes, hair, fingernails, feet, eyes, arms, legs, ears, mouth, heart, back, belly, little finger, chin, shoulders and neck. On another, the separate *khwan*s are those of the hair, head, nose, hands, ears, teeth, spine, belly, little finger, neck, chin and shoulder-blades.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Tai Neua**

Only a single passage which was found reveals some of the beliefs regarding what Bourlet calls the 'souls' of the Tai Neua. After a woman has given birth and completed her period at the fire, there will be a solemn calling of the souls (for the Neua believe in several of these), of both mother and child. Because of the birth, the souls of the mother may have disengaged themselves and may be roaming in the forest. With regard to the baby, its souls have not yet settled firmly in its weak body. It is a good occasion for offering a sacrifice to the spirit of the house, the soul of the latest dead ancestor, who might have been offended by the impurities brought about by the birth. Two chickens are killed, one for the house spirit, the other for the roaming souls of the mother, those of the child have to be content with two eggs. One of the chickens and both eggs are placed on a small tray which the sacrificer holds in one hand, whilst he has a lighted candle in the other. He descends the ladder of the house, his right hand moves the candle and he calls 'O, souls come'. Returning to the house he places the eggs and chicken on a plate and says 'Souls who have fled from the house, who have fallen through a gap of the floor, come and eat this food, offerings of our poverty. Do not stay away, O souls'. On the plate are arranged five pairs of sticks, one pair for each soul.<sup>45</sup>

From this account it can be inferred that the Neua observe rituals similar to the *khwan* rituals already encountered. It seems they recognise five *khwan*s. There is an inclusion of chicken eggs, a search for the missing souls, an invocation and a sacrifice. No information has been given regarding the possible inclusion of rice or of a binding of cotton thread at the conclusion of the ritual. No mention is made of the ritual objects in the local vernacular.

### **The Black Tai**

The Black Tai also believe in *khwan*s, and these are believed to be able to flee the body when someone has a fright or a surprise. A sneeze could cause some to drop and the loss of *khwan*s will cause a fever. Sometimes an offended divinity may capture some *khwan*s from a person and thus cause illness. A ritual specialist who can send his own *khwan*s out of his

<sup>43</sup> C. Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao (rites et mythes)*, Vientiane: Vithagna, 1973, pp. 183-4.

<sup>44</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, p. 155 and p. 160.

<sup>45</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', pp. 362-3.

body to look for the lost ones will have to be called. He makes offerings to the offended deities and guides the lost *khwan* back through the difficult routes.<sup>46</sup>

There is also a belief in the *khwan* of rice and a small offering is made in the granary in order to ask the rice-*kuo* *muang* to stay there throughout the winter.<sup>47</sup>

With regard to the number of *khwan* there are conflicting reports. Lafont reports that each living person has twenty-one *khwan*, and at the end of his article he gives a complete enumeration namely, the *khwan* of the skull, forehead, eyes, mouth, nose, ears, neck, heart, lungs and liver, intestines, stomach, shoulders, shoulder-blades, neck, arms, breasts, sides, waist, buttocks, hips, the 'swallowing' *khwan* (which constitutes the capacity to sustain long walks), in the knees, soles of feet, arms, hands, ankles, wrists, toes, fingers and eyebrows. It can be noted that several parts of the body which have been mentioned as having a *khwan* for other Tai groups cannot be found in this list, such as the *khwan* for the eyelashes, the hair, the chin, the teeth, and the spine. Moreover, in the case of toes and the fingers, ten different objects are mentioned as having a *khwan*, whilst the Laotians regard the little finger by itself having such an entity.

When Maspero questioned ritual specialists regarding the number of *khwan*, one enumerated approximately thirty, but another could name eighty-one of them and added that he was not sure of having mentioned them all. Some of these *khwan* are localised in a limb, or in a specific part of the body, such as the small *khwan* which help the eyes see clearly and the *khwan* of the nose, 'where the air goes in and out'; the *khwan* of the mouth 'which can talk'; the *khwan* of the feet, the hands, etc. Others are in charge of a quality, 'the *khwan* which works in the garden' and 'the *khwan* which supervises the whole body'.<sup>48</sup>

In the ethnographic literature there exists one description of the calling and welcoming of a lost *khwan* amongst the Black Tai. If a ritual specialist does not succeed in bringing back a lost *khwan* through a sacrifice and prayer, he proceeds with a 'collecting' ceremony. Placing a piece of the patient's clothing and a dried fish in a sack which he carries over his shoulder and a throwing net in his hand, the spirit-doctor goes to the nearest morass. Several times he throws the net out over the marsh land whilst saying, 'come and eat, come and dress, come back to your house'. Then he returns to the patient's house where a chicken is prepared and the *suu khwan* ceremony takes place at an auspicious time. In an offering tray the boiled chicken, eggs, bananas, areca nuts, cotton threads and a bottle of rice-wine are placed. This tray is set in front of the patient, the doctor sits in front facing the patient and the parents sit behind the sick person. Then the ritual specialist begins his invocation calling the stray 'souls', begging them not to rest and wander, but to return to the body. After the lengthy supplication the sick person extends his left arm horizontally with the lower arm held at a right angle, the hand extended with the palm upwards. The spirit-doctor

<sup>46</sup> H. Maspero, *Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971, p. 269.

<sup>47</sup> Maspero, 'Mœurs et coutumes', pp. 236-7. See also L. R. Pedersen 'Religious Activities During Dry Season among the

Iao Song Dam, Thailand', *Folk*, Volume 16-7, 1974/5, pp. 376-8.

<sup>48</sup> Lafont, 'Notes sur les familles patronymiques', p. 807.

<sup>49</sup> Maspero, *Le Taoïsme*, p. 269.

holds a cotton thread by its ends, draws it over the forearm in order to draw out evil, and subsequently encircles the wrist and ties a knot. He places his thumb on the knot and pronounces good wishes. The same operation is then performed upon the right arm.<sup>50</sup>

### **The White Tai**

The beliefs and practices of the White Tai regarding the *khwans* have not been described in the same detail as those of the Black Tai, but the few references in the literature indicate that in broad outline they are similar to those of the Black Tai. Maspero mentions Black and White Tai in one breath when he tells us that they believe that a living person has a great number of *khwan*s.<sup>51</sup> Rispaud tells us that there are thirty-two of these,<sup>52</sup> whilst Silvestre makes a distinction between the *khwan*s of the head and *khwan*s of the body.<sup>53</sup> From a dictionary entry which mentions 'khhek khhoan — to call one's spirit souls (whose departure is alleged to cause sickness)',<sup>54</sup> it seems that they share the same beliefs regarding the effect of the loss of *khwan*s upon a person, and that they possess some ritual of recalling such a lost element.

### **The Red Tai**

Not long after birth, a child of the Red Tai people has to undergo a ritual which Robert describes in broad outline. He calls it '*et khoan*', the calling of the 'soul'. A female ritual specialist officiates. A chicken and two eggs are put in a plate which she holds in the left hand. In her right hand she moves a candle, whilst standing at the foot of the stairs of the house where the child has been born. She calls 'Come, O souls', and then climbs up the stairs. Putting the chicken and eggs on a tray she continues her appeal: 'Souls who have departed, fallen through a gap in the floor, come and eat these foods offered from our poverty, do not stay away, O souls'. Several pairs of sticks on the tray serve as *khwan*s. The chicken is offered for the *khwan*s of the mother and the eggs for those of the child. Another chicken is offered for the ancestors.<sup>55</sup>

During a marriage ceremony, a man who takes the title of *ke m> khoan* holds a ceremony to the *khwan*s of the bride and groom. Again there will be two eggs and a chicken, the eggs are given simultaneously to the couple, who eat this food and receive good wishes.<sup>56</sup> '*Et khoan*' for a sick person whose *khwan* has been taken away by a spirit called *si pu*, is described as follows:<sup>57</sup>

On a tray, near the main door of the house the patient's relatives place a chicken, glutinous rice, distilled alcohol, betel and areca nuts. Nearby

<sup>50</sup> Lafont, 'Pratiques médicales', pp. 833-5.

<sup>51</sup> Maspero, 'Moeurs et costumes', p. 241.

<sup>52</sup> Rispaud, 'Sur une tribu', p. 750.

<sup>53</sup> Silvestre, 'Les Thaï blancs', p. 36.

<sup>54</sup> J. Donaldson and Dieu Chinh Nhim, *Tai-Vietnamese-English Vocabulary*, Saigon: Bo Giao-Duc Xuat Ban, 1970, p. 170.

<sup>55</sup> Robert, *Notes*, p. 42. The formula is almost identical with that described for the Neua, including the detail of the sticks. Robert, however, does not think that each stick stands for a *khwan*, for he later mentions the large number of *khwan*s.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-5.

on the mat a white cloth is placed. At the altar of the ancestors similar gifts are put down. The ritual specialist addresses the spirit who, it has been found out by a woman-diviner, does not want to release the *khوان*, stating that it is known that this spirit has taken possession, asking him to consume rice or corn and a betel, and to chew betel as well as accept the cloth in return to the *khwan* which he has taken. With further divination it is decided whether or not the offer has been accepted.

Finally, Robert also reports on the number of *man* in the human body. The total number is one hundred and forty. These are subdivided into two groups, namely for the head and body belonging to the rest of the body.<sup>58</sup>

### The Tho

The descriptions of the Tho conception of 'soul' indicate strong Chinese influence. Thus the Tho believe in three 'subtle souls' which they call '*hon*' (*hum*), and seven 'vegetative souls', called by an Annamite word, '*nia*'. The *hum* are connected with the male principle, and after death these go to the other world. The *nia* may be regarded as part of the female principle. Women have two more of these *nia* than men. After death the *nia* remain on earth.<sup>59</sup> Bonifacy, discussing the same topic confirms this general picture but he provides us with the Tai words for *hum* and *nia*. *Hum* is called *minh* by the Tho people and *nia* corresponds with the Tai word '*quam*'. We may recognise the latter as the same word we have encountered amongst other groups as *khwan* and *khon*.<sup>60</sup>

Thus it is clear that the Tho equate the Annamite word *nia*, which corresponds with the Chinese concept *p'o*, with the Tai concept *khwan*. On first sight, it would have made a much neater picture if *hum* had been equated with *khwan*, since they appear somewhat homophonous. Following the same principle, *p'o* should have been equated with the Tai *phi* or *fi*. The fact that the Tho do not equate *hum* and *khwan* may be regarded as a first indication that the two concepts may be not related at all, a topic discussed later in this chapter.

### The Trung-Cha

A single reference to the Trung-Cha which may be relevant for our survey is the report that they believe that there are thirty six vital spirits in each human body. After death they disperse some to the altar of the ancestors, some to the grave.<sup>61</sup>

## PART II: ANALYSIS

Much of the information regarding the beliefs in 'vital elements' and their ceremonies, described in the beginning of Chapter 3 and the first part

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>59</sup> 1904, pp. 361 and 364.

<sup>60</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> Le Brun, *et al.* *Livres Grands de Mankind Southeast Asia*, p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> A. Bonifacy, 'Les rites de la mort chez les Tho'. *Revue Indochinoise*, Volume I,

of Chapter 4 has been brought together in Table 8. It is abundantly clear from the ethnographic data that a belief in 'elements of life-force' is universal amongst the Tai: all groups perceive the body to have certain invisible localised, quantities of energy and vitality. Ubiquitous is also the belief that one or more of these elements can be lost through a moment of unawareness, through a fright or a traumatic experience. We may safely assume that these ideas formed part of the Tai belief system at the end of the first millennium A.D. It is also quite clear that all Tai name the concept by the same term. The Ahom word *khian*, the Assamese Tai word *khon*, the concept *khwan* amongst Shan, Nua, Lue, Yuan, Thai, Laotians, and Black Tai, *khwan* (*xwan*)<sup>62</sup> of the White Tai, *khoan* of the Red Tai and *quān* of the Tho are clearly related. Li's reconstruction of approximately eighth century Tai words gives the early common form *khvōen* (*xwan*).<sup>63</sup> In the coming pages, when referring to the Tai concept of 'element of life-force', the rendering *khwan* has occasionally been chosen to represent the idea in all Tai languages.

Table 8 may not be regarded as a complete and definitive statement. It is merely an overview of the evidence readily gleaned from the available ethnographic literature. The many open places do not necessarily mean that certain details are unknown to certain Tai-speaking groups; it merely means that there have been no explicit statements regarding such details. The Assamese Tai, whose *khwan* ceremonies have been described in Chapter 3, apparently share fully in this tradition. Yet, until my observations were recorded, there had been little indication that Shan regularly held *khwan* rituals. It is to be expected that future anthropological reports on the Burmese Shan will fill in most of the gaps in the column, especially if the anthropologist in question is aware of the usual details of these Tai rituals. There is yet another aspect in which the statement of Table 8 is incomplete, namely in the number of columns provided. In the first place there are various Tai groups of whom no information regarding *khwan*s was obtained at all, and in the second place there may be yet many more relevant details of *khwan* rituals which can be recorded for all groups. Thus it is interesting to read that the Lue and the Assamese Tai call the summoning of *khwan*s with a word which sounds remarkably similar, *hong khwan* for the Lue and *hong khon* for the latter groups. The therapeutic ritual recorded for the Tai of northeastern Thailand must take place early in the morning, that for collecting the *khwan* of a sick child amongst the Tai of Assam must take place at dusk. The prescriptions regarding auspicious times for these rituals have not been noted by most observers and we cannot say at this stage whether there are general rules regarding the right moments of the day shared amongst the Tai peoples. Even more fascinating are the rules of binding the white thread. Most Assamese Tai insist that females should have their left wrist bound first and males should be bound on the right side before proceeding with the other. For some other Tai groups such as the Tai Yuan, it is clearly thought that both men and women should be bound on the left before the right wrist is done. On most occasions the ethnographers simply did not consider it relevant to collect and report the

<sup>62</sup> Fang Kuei Li, *A Handbook of Comparative Tai*. Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No. 15, 1977, p. 241.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241 and p. 271.

TABLE 8 — THE TAI AND VITALITY ELEMENTS

Ahom	Assamese	Tai	Shan	Lue	Nua	Yuan	Thai	Isaan	Lao	Neua	Black	White	Tai	Red	Tai	Tho	Trung-	cha
f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	36
n	33	32	32	32	62	62	32	32	32	32	5	5	32	120	7	9	7	36
Belief in khwans Number of khwans																		
Belief khwan can escape the body Therapeutic cotton	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
using egg	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
fish net	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
Thong	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
using tray	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
egg	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
candle	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
Khwans (with life-cycle ritual)	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f
Binding cotton	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	f	n	n	n	n	n
Belief in rice khwans	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	f	f	f	n	n	n
Therapeutic stroking over hand or arm	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	f	n	n	n	n	n

n = not found in the literature  
f = found

information on whether one side was bound before another, or whether there was a rule observed regarding this binding.

Although the information on Table 8, may be incomplete, yet there are many instances where there are similarities between Tai groups which have not been in direct contact in historical times. The survey indicates quite clearly that there are two different basic types of *khwan* ceremonies, the collecting and the summoning. Leaving the house and collecting a *khwan* is purely therapeutic, whilst the summoning rituals can be used both for sick people and as part of general life-cycle events. The literature on Tai and their *khwan*s suggest strongly that there are two further activities which can be distinguished, the 'stroking away evil' over arm or hand, and the binding the wrists with a white thread. The stroking ritual has been noted for four distinct groups and the Assamese evidence suggests that it is part of a separate therapeutic technique which occasionally finds its way in the therapeutic *khwan* ritual. The wrist-binding ritual is much more common and appears to be firmly linked with both basic *khwan* rituals.

With regard to the utensils and ingredients during the collecting of *khwan*s the use of an egg, rice, and a fishing implement are reported for widely scattered groups, whilst the use of a candle is reported for a more limited region. Instances of a fishing implement and a piece of clothing of the patient are too few to warrant conclusions. As to the basic summoning ritual, a tray, often with several layers, one or two eggs, cooked rice, bananas, candles, and the offering of a chicken seem so widespread as to form a pattern. The reports of areca nuts, and rice-wine, are too infrequent to be included in such a general Tai ritual. The use of a wide array of weapons and tools in the summoning ritual of the Assamese Tai appears to be specific to these groups only.

From this survey we may thus conclude that the ancient Tai culture is likely to have known *khwan* rituals both basic ceremonies of collecting and summoning as well as extensions of life cycle events. During the collecting ceremony it is likely that boiled rice and an *eng* were used, whilst the summoning must have been done with more ingredients, such as candles, bananas and a small sacrifice. Moreover, it seems likely that the ancient Tai culture also comprised a therapeutic technique of stroking the arm or hand in order to draw out evil. A ritual of binding the wrists with cotton thread is also so widespread amongst the Tai peoples that it must have formed part of their common heritage, and the belief that rice has a *khwan* also falls into this category. Naturally, this does not mean that any of these aspects were necessarily invented or developed by the Tai alone. In the wider survey which follows, it will become clear that several of these rituals are well known amongst surrounding ethnic groups and it cannot be decided with certainty whether the Tai have spread certain of these beliefs or whether they were the recipients of some of these. A few tentative remarks regarding these wider implications are made at the end of this chapter.

#### **The number of *khwan*s**

One of the most interesting results of this survey is the remarkably high number of *khwan*s recognised by many Tai groups. There are only three

instances of low numbers, namely the people of central Thailand who are uncertain as to the number of *khwans* and can name but a few, the Neua whom Bourlet surmises to have five *khwans* for the simple reason that there are five pairs of sticks used in the basic ritual and the Tai who recognise seven *khwans* for men and nine for women. The Tai appear to have forgotten how many separate *khwans* they have. The evidence shows clearly that they once distinguished a considerably number. As to the Neua, a comparison of the ritual details with those for the Red Tai by Robert indicates that Bourlet may have read more into the number of sticks than was warranted. The Tho appear to have adopted the Chinese tradition in recognising seven or nine '*p'o*'.

Of the remaining eleven groups who have specifically mentioned a number of *khwans*, the total varies between thirty-two and one hundred-and-twenty. The number thirty-two is most frequently mentioned and on first sight this number would appear to be the obvious Ancient Tai number of *khwans*. Yet there are strong arguments against this theory. In the first place the actual enumeration of *khwans* for one group does not fully correspond with that of another. The full list of thirty-two *khwan*s of the Black Tai does not comprise many of the *khwan*s that are mentioned for neighbouring groups. Secondly, most ritual specialists who state that there are thirty-two of these elements of vitality cannot produce a list similar to that of the Black Tai. The one list produced for Laos by Gosselin confuses the thirty-two-fold division of body elements of the Buddhist canon with the Tai division in *khwan*s.<sup>64</sup> Other authors also have surmised that the Tai list of *khwan*s must have been based upon some Indian system of medicine.<sup>65</sup> It is, however, clear that the principles underlying the Tai division of *khwan*s and those underlying the Indian medical system are quite distinct. The Indian list mentions not specifically localised parts of the body, such as 'body hair', 'nails', 'skin', 'flesh', 'sinews', 'bones', 'marrow', 'membranes', 'digestive juice', 'pus', 'blood', 'sweat', 'fat', and 'lymph'. None of these are found in the Tai list of *khwan*s. The Tai lists contain predominantly specific parts of the body, such as 'hand', 'finger', 'elbow', 'spine', etc. Moreover, these parts themselves are not considered to be *khwan*s. *Khwan*s are the aspect of vitality and health of the particular parts of the body. The Tai belief in *khwan*s reveals a quite different perspective of the human body than that which may be derived from the Khuddakapatha, and we may safely assume that the two are quite unrelated.

It seems more likely that various Tai groups have assumed that they possess thirty-two *khwan*s under the influence of Buddhist texts such as the Khuddakapatha.<sup>66</sup> According to this hypothesis, various Tai ritual specialists, knowing that there are a considerable number of *khwan*s and having become aware that Buddhist medical science divided up the body in thirty-two constituents, took it for granted that Buddhist science and Tai medical views were part of one and the same system and that in the Buddhist manuals the complete list of *khwan*s was given. The belief in the thirty-two bodily signs

<sup>64</sup> Gosselin, *Le Laos*, p. 173.

*Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume XXXVI, 1977, pp. 253-4.

<sup>65</sup> Heinze, 'Nature and Function', p. 92; A. T. Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation', *Rajadhorn, Essays on Thai Folklore*, p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> This has been also the thought of

of a *mahapurusa* may also have played a role. This hypothesis would account for some of the reluctance of ritual specialists to enumerate thirty-two *khwans*. It would also account for the fact that there is disagreement amongst the groups and that some specialists can enumerate many more than thirty-two.

Having thus accounted for the frequent mention of thirty-two *khwans*, there remain yet various other accounts. The Assamese Tai disagree amongst each other whether they have thirty-three, thirty-six or one hundred-and-twenty *khwans*, the latter made up of thirty for the head and ninety for the rest of the body. The Lue have thirty in the back and thirty-two in the front. The Black Tai specialist questioned by Maspero enumerated eighty-one and thought there were still more. The Red Tai have ninety in the head and thirty for the rest of the body, and for the Trung-cha we have noted that they perceive thirty-six *khwans*. Finally we can add that a Laotian source reports on a fluctuating number of *khwans*, between a low of thirty and a high of ninety.<sup>67</sup>

The numbers thirty-three and thirty-six are found in rather isolated cases, and again it is possible that these numbers have been chosen to correspond with some auspicious number from surrounding cultures. Thirty-three is frequently recurring number in Hindu and Buddhist cosmogonies and mystical *mandalas*. In a similar fashion one could try and explain the two occurrences of the number thirty-six.

A different case appears to be the number thirty, sometimes in combination with ninety. There are the striking similarities in the accounts of the Khamyang and Khamti informants regarding thirty *khwans* in the head and ninety in the body, and the Red Tai account of ninety in the head and thirty in the body. It is quite unfeasible that the two groups have had contact in historical times and yet the versions appear quite similar and belonging to one tradition. Added to these remarkable similarities can be the recurrence of a number thirty as the number of one division of *khwan*s of the Lue, and the account of the Laotian informant that the *khwans* vary between thirty and ninety. The five traditions thus appear to form the tail ends of one which indicates that the Ancient Tai recognised a division of the body in which thirty, ninety or the sum of these two was the number of *khwans*. We do not have sufficient details to surmise more than this, and hopefully there will still be obtained more ethnographic details regarding the enumeration to clarify the picture even further. If the number thirty indeed formed one of the numbers which the Tai associated with their *khwans*, this would throw some light on the question why the Tai under Buddhist influence frequently settled for a heretofore number of thirty-two, rather than for one of the lower auspicious numerals often stressed in various traditions, such as the number seven, or twelve.

### **The concept in neighbouring cultures**

#### *a. The Burmese*

The Tai belief in 'elements of life-force' has many parallels amongst peoples surrounding the Tai. The Burmese are reported to believe in a

<sup>67</sup> Philavong, *Xhou Mu*, 1967, p. 105, as quoted by Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, p. 138.

*leip-byá*, or 'butterfly-spirit' which may flee the body. Scott describes for the Karens how, when a person is sick, people may run about with an open cloth in their hands and has suddenly thrown the cloth over a bush or a tussock of grass and then close it carefully. *Lek-páttó* 'butterfly' of the sick man is supposed to have been captured and the cloth is carefully opened up and shaken over the patient's head.<sup>68</sup> It is not clear from these summary descriptions whether the concept corresponds to an element of vitality, the concept is represented in a multitude of more elaborate ceremonies. It seems that the Baen use *re-páttó* as a single *páttó* in a human body.

### b. *The P'u Noi*

The Kha P'ai P'u Noi people of Phong Saly province in northern Laos believe in nine 'vital breaths' in the body of males and ten amongst females. These nine are: head, mouth, heart, eyes, stomach, hands, ears, back and feet. The tenth is held up by the breasts of the woman. Sickness is attributed to an absence of one or more of these 'vital breaths'.<sup>69</sup> Roux provides us with a description of the ritual to recall 'lost souls'. An animal offering is made, and divination is needed to see whether this sacrifice is acceptable to the spirits. On the offering tray are also deposited five bowls of uncooked rice, two containers with rice-wine, white thread, a bowl of cooked rice, a bowl of water, a small spade, white cloth, some money and ornaments, a banana and a piece of sugarcane, all to attract the wandering 'soul'. The sorcerer implores the lost soul to return and ends by binding the white thread around the wrists of the sick person.<sup>70</sup> Apart from the differing number of 'vital breaths' between males and females and the relatively small number of these 'souls', the ritual shows great similarity with that found amongst the Lao peoples who live around these Kha P'ai P'u Noi. According to Deydier, there is a strong Laotian influence visible.<sup>71</sup>

### c. *The Hmong*

The Hmong of northern Thailand believe a man has seven different 'souls' and these are divided over the body as follows: one in each eye, one in each ear, one in the nose, one in the mouth, and one in the heart. The concept in Hmong language is called *phu*.<sup>72</sup> Some Hmongs believe that they have but three souls which separate upon death, a belief apparently derived from Chinese.<sup>73</sup> When a 'soul' goes astray the owner will become sick and a shaman may advise holding a therapeutic ceremony. An animal sacrifice is made and put on a banana leaf on a tray near the door of the house of the patient. The shaman stands near the tray and

<sup>68</sup> Scott, *The Burman; His Life and Notions*, pp. 237-8; see also Ba Han, 'Spiritism in Burma', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Volume 47, Pt. 1, 1964, pp. 6-7.

<sup>69</sup> H. Roux, 'Deux tribus de la région de Phongsaly (Laos septentrional)' *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 24, 1924, p. 467.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 469-71.

<sup>71</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, p. 132.

<sup>72</sup> Nusit Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Nyua*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1976, p. 30.

<sup>73</sup> G. Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962, p. 38.

face the door utters spells to call the patient's 'souls' to return home and come back to the body where they belong. The sacrifice is then offered to the ancestors. Then all people present will bind pieces of white thread around the patient's wrists, wishing him a long life and good fortune. Some give him money and all present consume some of the sacrifice and home-made alcoholic drink.<sup>73</sup> It is quite clear from this account that the Hmong share with the Tai the belief in separate, localised 'vital elements', and that they consider these to be male and that their loss brings sickness and disease. The therapeutic ceremony has several details in common with that found amongst the Tai, notably the binding of the wrists with white thread. However the number of separate 'vital elements' is much lower than that of the Tai their location is different and some ritual objects which seem essential in the Tai therapeutic ceremony, such as one or more eggs, are absent.

#### d. *The Lua' of northern Thailand*

The Lua' believe in thirty-two 'souls', which they call *laembok*. They are elements that live in the body. Illness or misfortune may be caused by the departure of one of these souls, so ceremonies may be held to bind them into the body, by binding the wrists of the affected person with cotton yarn.<sup>74</sup> If one of the souls has departed, it must be called and invited to enter a hard-boiled egg. This egg is eaten by the patient and often by other members of the family during the wrist-tying ceremony. The Lua' of northern Thailand also consider rice, elephants, and buffalos to have such souls, and they may tie the buffalo's horns with cotton yarn, and the elephant may be provided with a cotton thread around his ears.

In this context it is relevant to note that the Lua' described by Kunstadter had 'almost completely lost their distinct cultural identity'.<sup>75</sup> It seems that they have adopted the Tai customs regarding *khwans*.

#### e. Vietnamese

Amongst the Vietnamese, the ritual of summoning the 'vital spirits' seems to be most prominent during funeral practices and the ritual details are strikingly reminiscent of those of ancient China, where a member of the family, carrying a piece of clothing from the deceased, climbs on the roof of the house, and calls loudly for the souls to return. The number of 'spirits' recognised here contains three 'subtle spirits' or *hun* and other 'spirits' called *nhat*, seven for men, nine for females. There is one description of a Vietnamese therapeutic ritual which appears related to those described for the Tai. When a child has had a bad fall people may believe that some 'spirit' will become disengaged. Near the place of the fall, if the child is male, seven bowls of rice and seven eggs (or sometimes seven pieces of the same egg) are placed, together with a garment of the child, in a winnowing basket. If the child is female, nine bowls of rice and nine eggs will be needed. Then the three *hun* and seven or nine *nhat* are called upon to return.

<sup>73</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong Lua'*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>74</sup> P. Kunstadter, *The Lua' (Lawa) of Northern Thailand: Aspects of Social Structure* Agriculture, and Religion, Research Monograph No. 21, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1965, p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Afterwards the garment is put on the child and the sickly infant must eat some of the rice and eggs.<sup>77</sup> This ritual demonstrates clearly that the therapeutic ritual of collecting a lost 'vital spirit' is traditionally known outside the Tai groups. Several interesting details such as the use of a winnowing basket, a garment, rice and eggs suggest contact between the Tai and the Vietnamese at some time during their history but by itself this evidence is insufficient to allow speculation on whether this contact was direct or via some other source. Similar to most other non-Tai groups described, the number of separate 'souls' or *pralim* is thirteen that reckoned by the Tai.

#### f. Cambodians

The largest number of separate 'child souls' of a human body encountered outside the Tai groups or groups which have adopted Tai culture is the number of nineteen *pralim* amongst the Cambodians. It should be noted, however, that these nineteen are developed from different principles than the *khwans* of the Tai. The nineteen *pralim* comprise ten major 'vital spirits' which correspond to ten bodily orifices, and nine lesser ones, four of these latter represent knowledge and consciousness, four relate to the capacity to memorise and the final one stands for the digestion. Apart from these nineteen *pralim* there are four *cato phut*, sometimes believed to be miniature humans, residing in the wrists and ankles.<sup>78</sup> The Cambodians hold the ceremony for calling a *pralim* at a lifecycle ritual such as ordination, and also in cases of certain types of illness. In addition they hold a ceremony to call the *pralim* of rice.

The ceremonial ingredients for an ordination *pralim*-calling are a pot with nineteen trays, boiled rice covered with a cone made of banana leaf, a piece of sugarcane and candles. In several Cambodian communities this is an occasion whereby the ritual specialist scrapes the teeth of the young man with a little knife, which is reminiscent of a teeth-siling custom. Regarding the eating of *pralim* for a sick child, in Cambodia there also exists the custom of pretending 'to fish' for the lost *pralim*, whilst calling the lost element not to be afraid. Nineteen leaves may be collected and placed next to the infant.<sup>79</sup> The tying of the wrists with cotton thread is also known in Cambodia.

#### g. Chinese

Evidence from China indicates that a custom of recalling a person's soul has been practised for thousands of years. In the fifth century B.C. Mo Tzu definitely mentions the Confucian practice of recalling the soul of a man who has recently died.<sup>80</sup> There is a famous poem of the third century B.C. called *chao hun*, or the 'summons of the soul', which elabor-

<sup>77</sup> Nguyen-Van-Koan, 'Le repêchage de l'âme', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient*, Volume 13, 1945, pp. 145-7.

<sup>78</sup> For many variants of the recalling ritual in Cambodia see *ibid.*, pp. 150-3.

<sup>79</sup> F. Porc-Maspero, 'La cérémonie de l'appel des esprits végaux chez les Cambodgiens', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française*

<sup>80</sup> B. Watson (translation), Mo Tzu, *Basic Writings*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1963, p. 125.

rates on the custom<sup>81</sup> and there is evidence that the ritual has been performed until the present day. *Chao nan* was used in ancient China for both the calling back of a wandering soul of a sick man and the summoning of the souls of the dead. The latter custom has become best known, probably as a result of the fact that it is mentioned in the ancient Book of Rites as a funeral ritual. When a man dies, a near relative, holding a garment of the deceased in his hand, should climb on the roof and cry out for the dead person to return.<sup>82</sup> The recall of the soul of sick people is also well known. De Groot mentions several instances. When a baby is sick, a mother<sup>83</sup> hastens up the roof of her house, and waving about a bamboo pole to which is affixed a garment belonging to the little one, exclaims several times in succession:

"My child So-and-so, come back, return home!" In the interim another inmate of the house is loudly beating a gong, to arouse the attention of the soul. After a while the vital spirits are expected to recognise the garment and to slip into it; and so, along with it, they are taken back to the sufferer and placed either upon or at the side of his bed.

The Chinese divide 'souls' into three 'superior' spirits or *hun*, and seven *p'o*, (næ for women), and the latter may be regarded as 'material' invisible elements.

The Chinese and Tai have in common the belief that an invisible element may be lost and cause sickness especially in children. Also they share the idea that one can call for this element to return and that the use of a garment during calling helps recover the missing 'soul'. Finally they have in common the practice that the garment, having been used to catch the 'soul', is placed near the sick person's bed to give the 'soul' the opportunity to return to its proper place. It could easily be argued that the Chinese concept for *hun* and that of the Tai *khwan* are basically the same, and that the Tai derive their idea of *khwan* from the Chinese. This is the assumption of Benedict when he places the Tai concept next to that of the Chinese and translates both as 'spiritual soul'.<sup>84</sup> Earlier in this chapter, when considering the Tho translation of *hun* as *minh* and *p'o* (via) as 'quon',<sup>85</sup> we noted that if the concepts *hun* and *khwan* were related, we could have expected *hun* to have been translated as 'quan'. An examination of the concept *hun*, the subtle souls, which are not localised in specific parts of the body, shows that it is altogether a different concept than the Tai concept *khwan*, which is attached to specific parts of the body and always connected with the idea of vitality. The Chinese concept *p'o* with its localisation and connection with body apertures and sensory organs comes much closer to the Tai idea

<sup>81</sup> D. Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u, The Songs of the South*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, pp. 100-9; See in the same work also the poem 'Ta Chao', pp. 109-14.

<sup>82</sup> Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u*, p. 101. For an overview of the custom in China through the centuries see J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Leyden: Brill, 1892, Vol. I, Book 1, pp. 243-62 and H. Dore, *Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine*, Shanghai: Tou-se-we, 1912, Pt. 1, Volume 2, No. 4, pp. 323-31. Textual references can be found

in F. D. Lessing, 'Calling the Soul: A Lamaist Ritual', in *Semitic and Oriental Studies Presented to William Popper* (edited by W. J. Fishel), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951, p. 280.

<sup>83</sup> De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Volume 1, Book 1, p. 243.

<sup>84</sup> P. K. Benedict, *Astro-Thai Language and Culture*, New Haven: HRAF Press, 1975, p. 129.

<sup>85</sup> See p. 81.

of *khwan*, though it is by no means identical. The translation of the Tho people support this affinity in meaning.

### Conclusions

With regard to the Tai belief in 'vitality elements' and that these can leave the body thus causing illness, the short outline of beliefs amongst surrounding peoples shows that similar beliefs can be found over a wide area of Asia. Quite often it is difficult to determine the exact range of meanings of the type of 'element' that can escape. A rather vague translation of 'soul' or 'spirit' is inadequate to convey the exact meaning of the various concepts involved. A 'butterfly spirit' in Burma appears somewhat different to the Tai idea of *khwan*, which, we have established basically can be translated as 'element of vitality'. The Chinese *p'o* and Vietnamese *ma* appear to a large extent directed towards body openings and sensory organs, and some of the Cambodian *prahm* appear to have been taken from the same tradition. Indeed the Chinese system with its seven or nine 'souls' is very widespread amongst the various ethnic minority groups such as the Akhas, the Man peoples, the P'u No, the Hmong and even amongst the Tibetans,<sup>66</sup> the peoples of the Malay peninsula, some Melanesians and the Toba-Bataks.<sup>67</sup> The Tai and their system of *khwan* seem quite distinct from this widespread idea of a relatively small number of 'souls'. The Tai view their body invigorated by a very large number of 'vital charges', noticeable in facial expressions, in muscle tone, in the capacity to work energetically and which seem frequently located at the joints of the body. Thus far we have been unable to discover, apart from the Lüa<sup>68</sup> who have been in close contact with Tai, any other ethnic group which shares the Tai system of locating 'vitality elements' or which recognises such large numbers of separate *khwan*.<sup>69</sup>

The ritual of calling back a lost 'soul' is a natural corollary of the belief that lost *khwan*, 'souls' or 'spirits' cause sickness. Taking an article of clothing of the patient, cautiously proceeding towards the place where the elements may have been lost, scooping them up and bringing them to the patient are acts which naturally appear to follow from the above mentioned belief. The survey of the literature has shown that such rituals are thousands of years old and widespread amongst many peoples.

The ritual of summoning the lost element seems to be a therapeutic variant which has come about from the belief that the element in question may have been irretrievable by ordinary means, such as when a demon has stolen somebody's 'soul' or the missing 'vital force' may be lost and wandering in far-off places. The greatest similarities of ritual detail seem to be the ones of the Tai and the Cambodians. This indicates an interchange or borrowing process at some time during the past. Since most of the ritual details appear amongst a wide range of Tai and thus seem to have been part

<sup>66</sup> R. A. Stein, 'Le liga des danses missées lamaïques et la théorie des âmes', *Sino-Indian Studies*, Volume 5, Pt. 3-4, 1957, pp. 200-34.

<sup>67</sup> Poree-Maspero, 'La cérémonie de l'appel des esprits vitaux', p. 177.

<sup>68</sup> A somewhat vague account of a Sangpho belief that each and every limb contains a soul appears also related to the fact that there is strong Khmu influence upon Sangpho religion. See BURIN, *The Siamese*, p. 111 and pp. 150-1.

of the ancient Tai culture, and since the contacts between Tai and Cambodians took place in a more recent period, it appears likely that the Cambodians were the recipients in this instance.

Similarly, in the literature, only Cambodians and Tai appear to have extended the summoning, feasting and tying of the vital elements over life-cycle rituals such as a first leaving of the house, a hairshaving, or a marriage ritual. Whilst some of these rituals may have spread over some Tai groups via the influence of the Mons and Khmers, the preoccupation with 'vital elements' is most likely to have been a Tai contribution.

The Assamese Tai appear quite unique in one detail of the summoning ritual, namely in the great accumulation of weapons and the threatening and forceful attitude of the ritual specialist. As a result of the overview of general Tai cultures we can label that detail essentially non-Tai, but we cannot say with any certainty from where that aspect was obtained, or whether it represents a local development. On first sight such threatening attitudes appear to fit better with Tibetan practices.<sup>89</sup>

The 'stroking away evil' thus far has not been found in the literature of surrounding peoples and since it was found in so far distinct Tai groups it may, for the time being at least, be regarded as a typically Tai therapeutic practice.

The binding with white cotton thread around the wrists may be regarded as a separate item. The custom is quite widespread. It is noted for the P'u Nor the Lua' and the Hmong and it has been reported for the Man of Vietnam, for peoples of the Malay peninsula, for the Bagabas of the Philippines and for peoples of Kalimantan and West Irian.<sup>90</sup> It does not seem to form part of the Chinese 'soul-summoning', nor does the feature occur in Tibetan descriptions of similar rituals.<sup>91</sup> There are occasions such as during funerals when Chinese bind a thread around people's wrists, but this thread is red and it appears to be little more than a ceremonial detail accompanying a good wish. If the red thread of the Chinese is related to the white one so widely reported for various peoples in Southeast Asia, it seems to be a custom that spread from the south. In general the Tai partake fully in this 'Southeast Asian' feature.

Regarding the belief that rice has a 'soul' or 'vital element' which at certain times of the year should be called or summoned, this belief the Tai share with the Cambodians, peninsular Malays and the Kayans of Kalimantan,<sup>92</sup> and this also may point in a similar direction. The latter details may be regarded as yet further arguments in favour of looking for Austronesian links when we consider the problems of the 'origin' of the Tai.

<sup>89</sup> Stein, 'Le linga', *passim*.

<sup>90</sup> Porée-Maspero, 'La cérémonie de l'appel des esprits vitaux', p. 175.

<sup>91</sup> Stein, 'Le linga', *passim*.

<sup>92</sup> Porée-Maspero, 'La cérémonie de l'appel des esprits vitaux', p. 173.

## 5

## THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY

**Wedding rituals amongst the Assamese Tai**

The traditional wedding rituals amongst the Khamyang begin with the sending of a go-between from the prospective groom's family. The emissary is usually a man of good reputation who can be expected to bring the proposal in a dignified manner. The envoy will carry with him a ritual container in which one hundred areca nuts and betel leaves are arranged. If the container is accepted by the girl's family the proposal is considered acceptable and further preparations can be made. The next stage is a formal party which will be held in the bride's parents' house, but paid for by the groom's family. During this meeting the details of the wedding are discussed, the various amounts of money to be placed in ritual containers are determined and a date for the ceremony is fixed with the help of a person well-versed in astrology who will take good note of the respective birthdays of bride and groom.

On the day of the wedding, at the appropriate hour, a procession of representatives of the groom's family will arrive at the bride's house. In the case of a major wedding a band of musicians may enliven the walk. Central in this procession are five containers with areca nuts and betel leaves, and some also with a sum of money. The account of the holdings and distribution of the ceremonial containers varies somewhat amongst the two Khamyang villages where the ritual has been discussed. In Chalapathar it was thought that three containers each had one hundred nuts and the two remaining ones each held eighty. The bride's mother's brother (*lung taa*) receives two receptacles, one with a hundred nuts, the other with eighty. The bride's father's brother (*poo tun*) gets the remaining container with eighty nuts whilst of the remaining two, one goes to the bride's parents and one to the guests. The *lung taa* who is the first to receive a ceremonial container, also accepts a sum of money. Farmers of Chalapathar could remember when this sum used to be five rupees, but with the devaluation of money and a general increase in prosperity this amount has now risen to at least ten rupees. The *lung taa* has to share this sum with the *poo tun*. The sum of money which the parents of the bride receive must be more than that given to *lung taa*, but the exact amount depends fully upon what the parties have agreed upon when the details of the wedding were discussed.

In the other Khamyang village, Powai Mukh, which appeared in many respects to have better retained the Tai culture, the account of the five containers was as follows:

Of the five ceremonial containers, one has a hundred areca nuts, the others all have eighty. The one with a hundred nuts is for the guests in general whilst the other four go to *lung taa*, *poo tun*, the bride's father and the bride's mother. *Lung taa* receives twenty rupees, *poo tun* fifteen,

whilst the parents receive an amount which has been agreed upon during previous deliberations. The amount is not very great, for the institution of bride-price is somewhat in abeyance.

The Chalapathar informants recalled that when the groom arrives at the house, he should be met by the bride's father who will place a spear on the groom's shoulder. This is symbolical of the alliance being made as well as an admonition to the groom to protect and defend his wife. In the house the bride's last meal in her parent's house is served. Bride and groom sit close together during this meal. Afterwards there will be the ritual of tying white cotton thread around the wrists of bride and groom. All informants agreed on the sequence of people who should perform this ritual. First comes the father of the bride, then the mother, then *lung taa*, then *poo tun*, followed by the other guests. During the tying of the thread good wishes are expressed. Immediately after the ritual of tying thread the couple is led to the most important pillar of the house, the *sao phi nam*, and kneeling close by this pillar at the eastern side of the house, bride and groom offer flowers whilst the ancestors are informed of the wedding and asked to look favourably upon the venture.

The moment of leaving the house of the bride should be at twilight. Traditionally the bride has to be carried to a ceremonial gate in the compound. The gate, according to Chalapathar people, is made of a long piece of bamboo which has been partly split into two but is still joined at the top. The two halves are spread wide apart so as to form the sides of the 'doorway'. It is possible to decorate this gateway with banana shoots or stalks of sugarcane. Only bride and groom are allowed to go under this gate. The Powai Mukh people also use a gate, but not made of bamboo. Their gate is made of a *phung lao* plant, which is a kind of reed. If *phung lao* is not available, two stalks of sugarcane, or two long shoots of a banana tree may be bound together at the top and spread apart, to form the gate.

The journey to the groom's house is also in procession. The *lung taa* and *poo taa* now accompany the bride. At the groom's house, a formal declaration called *vieng sao* is made when they hand the bride over to the groom's family. In this declaration it is stressed that the girl is yet inexperienced and not fully trained and the family of the groom is asked to understand that she still needs a great amount of teaching and guidance. Both bride and groom are also instructed by a person who is generally known to be wise and successful in building up good relationships in his or her own marital life. The instruction covers items of proper behaviour and good manners as well as a plea for kindness and understanding. The bride may be asked to get up early in the morning and begin her household tasks with alacrity, to keep a clean house and gentle disposition. The man will be instructed to be hard-working, to keep his attentions to his own family, to be gentle and understanding. The couple is then led to the ritual pillar of the groom's house and formally introduced to the ancestors of the groom's family.

The marriage ceremony amongst the Phakey people as described in Namphakey village differs considerably from that of the Khamyang. The betrothal should be arranged via a go-between, but amongst the Phakey it is customary to select two persons, usually women for this task. They are called *paceu*, or messengers. The *paceu* should be people who have raised a

family without mishap and ideally one should have been born on a Sunday, the other's birthday should fall on a Thursday. The envoys carry a *ho yaa*, or tobacco-container, which is a ceremonial object prepared with the utmost care. It consists of two leaves of the *ton ang* plant (in Assamese this plant is called *kopal*) on which an amount of tobacco is placed. The leaves are folded together as to form a narrow small cone and the whole is held into place by a bamboo thread which is knotted and folded neatly on top and the ends of which have been cut off with particular care. The emissaries are usually received well and under normal circumstances it is decided that a formal meeting of both families should take place in order to discuss the details. The two envoys will be present during these deliberations.

On the day of the marriage, one of the messengers will approach the bride's house with a packet of *ho yaa* and ask whether the clan has assembled. When the answer is affirmative, the second envoy comes with another *ho yaa* as well as a small ceremonial container (in Assamese called *bati*) which holds four eggs and which is covered by a traditional piece of cloth. The eggs are shown to the bride's parents. Then there will be the handing over of the bride-price, which may be as much as 140 rupees, or even reach 200 rupees. The receptacle with the money must contain many flowers. If the bride's elder brother has not yet married there should be an extra three rupees paid to this sibling. A further amount of money, to a maximum of some forty rupees is presented for other members of the bride's family. Traditionally there had to be ten packets of pickled fish, called *paa suam*, handed over to the bride's parents, each packet weighing about five kilograms. During the wedding ceremony, these packets had to be opened by the two female go-betweens. Then the bride and groom are led forward and together they kneel near the sacred pillar of the house which the Phakey people call *sau phu lang*. There they pay respect to the ancestors and show the four eggs. Then the couple pays respect to the guests who at this moment will return the forty rupees that has been presented to them by the groom's family. Then the *phuuk suai*, or tying with white cotton thread takes place.

The Phakey people do not use a ceremonial gate for bride and groom at the moment when the bride leaves the house, just the ordinary gate of the compound is used. When the bride is handed over at the groom's parent's house the Phakey also have a *siung sao*, or a declaration concerning the teaching of the young girl. They declare that the girl is still very young and not knowledgeable, they invite the clan of the groom to teach her whatever skills she needs, to train her properly. Then follows the advice to the married couple as described above.

It is clear from the accounts of marriage customs of the two groups of Khamyang Fai surveyed at the beginning of this chapter that we are dealing with two distinct variants. The Khamyang have one male go-between, they use areca nuts as ritual objects and they make use of a ritual gate, whilst the Phakey have two female envoys, they use tobacco, eggs and pickled fish as ritual objects and do not know the use of a ceremonial gate. The Khamti villagers of Borkhamti Gaon in North Lakhimpur described yet another variant.

On the agreed date, after all preliminary discussions have been concluded, a male envoy will proceed to the bride's house. The groom him-

self does not appear at this house on his wedding day. His envoy carries a platter on a stand which contains a number of eggs, a quantity of areca nuts and betel leaves and fourteen rupees. This container is wrapped in a beautiful cloth which is folded in a cone shape. The whole gift is called *wang khai*. In case no eggs are available, potatoes may be used as a substitute. This *wang khai* is symbolic of the proposed agreement and when the bride's party receives this gift and opens the cloth they may be considered to be committed to hand over the girl after all formalities have been observed. The groom's representative also brings various other gifts such as packets of pickled fish, molasses or sugar as well as yet another amount of money. The exact quantities are not fixed by tradition. During the preliminary negotiations the groom's party has come to an understanding regarding what is expected. This depends amongst other things upon the size of the bride's family. Normally speaking pickled fish is not a gift to bring to a festive occasion, but this is traditionally done with marriage rituals only.

The bride's relatives will distribute the extra money, the eggs and the whole areca nuts. The bride's maternal uncle, fraternal uncle and elder brother must not be forgotten, but other relatives such as the bride's younger brother might also share. It is not traditionally determined whether the father of the bride will keep anything for himself or whether he will give all away. Then there is a party at the bride's house at which boiled rice soup (*khaو tum*) and rice-wine is consumed. Both bride and groom, however, will have to fast until they are united at the groom's house when they will eat formally and when the groom will feed the bride and the bride in her turn will offer food to the groom.

### **The wedding ritual amongst other Tai groups**

#### **a) Ahom**

The Ahom marriage system is called *cuk-lang* or *chak lang* in the literature.<sup>1</sup> Usually the rituals are spread out over three days. On the first day the groom's party carries two large earthenware pots wrapped in beautiful cloths. Inside each pot is clothing, ornaments, rice and a fresh mango twig, each twig having five leaves. The party also brings two packets with black pulse paste and two packets with turmeric, as well as two areca nuts or two sets of implements connected with betel chewing. After the formal presentation of these gifts the groom's party will carry back one of the two pots, one pulse packet, one with turmeric and one areca nut. This ritual appears to be a formal assurance that the proposed contract is acceptable. The first day is also marked by a ceremonial bathing of bride and groom, each at their own home, for which occasion special bath houses have been

<sup>1</sup> A few remarks on the Ahom marriage customs can be found in S. K. Bhuyan (editor), *Deodhai Asam Buranjis*, Gauhati: Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies 1962, p. xv, and in Basu, *Assam in the Ahom Age*, pp. 216-7. The most

detailed account in the English language, however, is in Padmeshwar Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, Chapter VIII. The summary given here is partly based upon Gogoi and partly upon personal observations and interviews.

constructed. There are various architectural differences between the bath houses of bride and groom, but in this context we will reserve the descriptions for a future occasion. In this book we will only mention that reputedly a raw egg is placed under the bath house, probably as a symbol of fertility. The first day is also used to perform the *rik-khwan* ceremony, which has already been described earlier. Also a festive meal dedicated to the ancestors would be appropriate for this day.

On the second day the bride and groom are again ceremoniously bathed, this time with water containing a variety of medicinal herbs and propitious substances such as an axe, a tiger's tooth, and shavings from deer or buffalo horn, all of which has been stirred and sanctified by a priest's incantations. In both the house of the bride and that of the groom offerings can be made to a number of deities. In the bride's house seven containers made from banana tree sheaths each holding areca nuts, of which the bark has been clipped at both ends, are used. These containers have been sent by the groom's family. In addition the officiating priests offer things such as a dozen eggs, a quantity of husked, uncooked rice, rice-wine, *sukkara* flowers and a dozen areca nut pieces rolled in a piece of betel leaf to the shape of a small cone (Assamese: *thuria tamul*) as well as a separate platter of areca nuts for the ancestors. The second day is also used by women to pound the *ganthian* root into a paste with which the bride will be marked on the forehead. This takes place after dusk has fallen and the activity is done in ritual secrecy, the women huddled in a circle, their *chaddars* pulled over their heads. In olden days this would be the time of the appearance of the *kolabori*, a grotesque figure, a man roughly made up to resemble a woman, with banana leaves tied to his body. The *kolabori* used to disturb the *ganthian*-pounding and perform some dances, giving a rough and comical imitation of some of the marriage rituals, such as the fishing with the *jakai* which reminds us of the *rik-khwan* ceremony.

On the third day at the bride's house a welcoming gate is constructed with succulent fresh banana trees tied to both upright posts. In the grounds of the bride's parents' house a pavillion is made. This is rectangular in shape and each side is at least three feet wide. The square on the ground is marked by large slices from a banana tree trunk and the four upright posts are also banana trees to which sugarcane is tied each tree in a bamboo tube. Some three or four feet above ground level a white cotton thread, which has been provided with mango leaves at regular intervals, is tied and the whole construction is provided with a canopy which has a red border. The priest and his assistants will spend hours creating on the floor of the pavillion an impressive and colourful scene. From the central point a series of concentric circles are drawn, so as to fill all available space, leaving only the four corners. These circles are made into coloured bands with rice powder which has previously been mixed with various colours. In the centre a small round pedestal is created, and, using more rice powder, the priest draws a swastika which divides the pedestal into four equal parts. In the middle an earthenware lamp is placed in such a manner that its four wicks point to the cardinal directions. Four smaller lamps surround this central one and a further 96 *bonti* lamps are placed in many rows radiating from the centre. Next to each lamp a *thuria tamul*, a flower and a coin are placed. Sometimes two coins are placed next to each lamp. Thus, altogether the colourful design

displays 101 lamps, 101 pieces of wrapped areca nut, 101 flowers and 101 or 202 coins. The number of 101 is used to symbolise the immensely large number of gods called in to witness the solemn marriage vows. As we will see later, also amongst some other Tai groups we will find the number 101 for a similar reason. The remaining four corners of the pavillion are provided with pots holding auspicious leaves, and each pot is provided at the neck with a thick lea of white cotton threads.

At a time, calculated to be auspicious, often this is eleven o'clock at night, the bride's father is asked to light the central lamps and the priest's helpers will set every remaining lamp ablaze. This is also the time when the groom's party sets out for the bride's house. On the way they may meet with youngsters obstructing the way, who may ask him to answer humorous riddles or demand money before letting him proceed.<sup>2</sup> As he arrives at the gate, rice grains are showered over the party. This grain throwing may also change into a more aggressive hurling of handfuls of rice, symbolising yet another obstacle the groom has to overcome. The bride's mother ceremoniously greets her future son-in-law, auspicious leaves are placed upon his head, his cheeks are wiped with betel leaves and evil spirits are dispelled before he can proceed to take place at the western side of the pavillion, facing east. At his left stands a container with the cloth which later will tie the couple, the ceremonial sword *hengdaan*, and a garland. The groom's representatives take place at the southern side of the pavillion. They send various platters with cloth, a small amount of money and areca nut to the various other parties involved. The last platter is sent to the bride herself, inviting her to come.

After a suitable interval she will make her appearance, dressed in the most exquisite robes. Great care is taken that bride and groom will be unable to exchange glances at this stage of the proceedings. Bride and groom sit side by side at the western side of the pavillion, the bride at the groom's left side. The northern end is reserved for the bride's father and the officiating priest. The parties first agree to accept the priest as officiant, and with each formal statement an offering of rice and flowers is thrown into the pavillion in front of them. Then the bride is officially handed over, formally accepted by the groom, a garland with 101 flowers is placed over the groom's head, and then over that of the bride. Then the couple is joined together by tying a piece of material to their clothing. Further rituals consist of prayers to the gods, a formal oath on the sword *hengdaan* and finally the priest will give a lengthy exhortation on the duties and proper behaviour of husband and wife.

This concludes the contractual stage of the marriage ceremony. Bride and groom are now led into the bride's house where they are given a rice basket in which a ring has been hidden. Both search amongst the grain and the person who first finds the ring is declared the winner of this innocent game. In another version of the rice basket game the groom hides a ring and the bride is allowed to find it. After having prostrated themselves

<sup>2</sup> Gogoi is of the opinion that the custom of obstructing the marriage procession in order to realise money is a degeneration of a more solemn gate ceremony and alien to the Tai-Ahom tradition. In the following sec-

tions we will see that this obstructing is a feature amongst many other Tai groups and therefore it may well be an essential Tai feature as well (See Padmashwar Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, p. 77).

before the bride's parents the newly-weds leave in procession for the groom's house. At the moment the bride has left her ancestral house all doors and windows must be hermetically closed. At the groom's house she is welcomed cordially and as a symbol of her welcome all containers she encounters will be full to the brim. Before entering her husband's bedchamber the bride, together with her new husband must make an offering of areca nuts to the deities.

Certain Hindu elements have attached themselves to the Ahom marriage custom, such as the practice for women to utter *vidhi-vow* at various crucial moments of the ritual and the use of oil lamps and oblations to the fire. However, the *cuk-lang* differs considerably from the marriage customs of the other Assamese groups and in the following overview it will become clear that essentially it has maintained a Southeast Asian pattern.

### b) *Shan*

Around the month of January or February the Shan of Mangshih on the border between Yunnan and Burma have the custom of tossing embroidered pillows between bachelors and unmarried girls. If a girl fails to catch a pillow she has to give the man who tossed it a valuable gift. If the young man is uneasy about being linked up with the girl he can let her 'win back' her property by dropping the pillow when she throws it to him. If he is interested in opening the betrothal proposals he can bring back the article to her parents house.<sup>8</sup>

The Shan of Namkham must consult an astrologer to determine the date of the wedding. On the morning of the wedding day bride and groom must be bathed near their respective homes. The actual wedding does not begin until about three o'clock in the afternoon. The wedding takes place in the bride's parents' house and early in the afternoon the groom is escorted in procession to that house by a group of men. The elder members of the groom's party offer to the father of the bride a number of baskets full of different kinds of foods. Amongst these articles there must always be four eggs and two salted fish. The representatives then formally ask for the bride, and after a proper hesitation and show of reluctance, the bride's family give in to the request.

One of the elders now leaves the house carrying small packets of tea, salt, and rice; these he holds over his head, at the same time calling on heaven and earth to bear witness to the marriage. When the elder returns to the house he twists a white string seven times around the left wrist of the bride and once round the right wrist of the bridegroom.<sup>9</sup> The groom leads the bride to a low table and the couple eat curry and rice in the presence of the wedding guests. The remainder of the bride-price is paid and in procession the bride is escorted to the groom's house where she is led to her new parents-in-law. Before the evening she will be instructed by an old woman who will tell her where the wedding bed must be placed, and that she always must sleep on the left side of that bed even if her husband is absent.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> C.Y. Lee, *The Sawbwa and His Secretary, My Burmese Reminiscences*, New York: Hillier, 1959, pp. 67-74. <sup>9</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 82, see also Ferrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959, pp. 118-9. <sup>10</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, pp. 81-5.

### c) *The Lue*

A summary description of the Lue marriage ceremony mentions that a betrothal date is fixed by approximately ten elders of the village, representing both parties involved. On the marriage day the groom will bring a cluster of about one hundred betel nuts and the bride will do the same. When agreement is reached, the man will deposit two 'hoi' (twelve rupees) as a purchase price, and the girl will present a dish of flowers and four pairs of wax candles. The two clusters of betel nuts are distributed amongst the families of both parties and vows are exchanged between bride and groom to behave well toward each other. The elders, together with the groom, then leave the bride's house but at dusk the groom and some of his friends return. At this stage the groom must carry a sword and a bag for carrying betel nuts as symbols of being a 'real man'. The groom stays for a period of three years at the bride's house, and after these three years the young couple may decide to spend another three years at the house of the groom's parents or decide to set up their own house.<sup>6</sup>

### d) *Yuan*

Le May points out that elaborate marriage ceremonies only take place amongst the wealthier sections of the population. Poor farmers simply decide to live together and send presents of areca nuts, betel leaves, candles and flowers to the groom's parents' house in order to propitiate the spirits of the house. If the groom's parents consent to the match 'suitable gifts' are given to the bride. Bride and groom live with the bride's parents until a next daughter gets a husband. It is not the custom for more than one married daughter to remain at home.

Only when the parents are relatively wealthy is there use of intermediaries to ask the girl's family for consent. On the wedding day the maiden remains alone in her room until the groom arrives with his parents and friends. The elders of the village bind the wrists of the young couple together. Then they are led solemnly into the bridal chamber and left there. After a few days, the bride's family send some gifts to the groom's parents' house to propitiate the spirits of the latter house for their loss.<sup>7</sup> Later in the same work, Le May mentions that the bride price has to be paid in traditional silver coins which were made in the shape of shells.<sup>8</sup> This is undoubtedly a ritual survival of the region's oldest currency, the kauri shell.

### e) *Thai*

In the first half of the seventeenth century, Schouten reported for the Siamese that the groom buys his bride for a sum of money of her father or friends, whereupon the marriage is made and concluded with a little feasting. Rather disappointingly he concluded: 'They have many other customs in marriage and succession, too long and tedious to write'.<sup>9</sup> Later during that same century De la Loube described the same ritual and began with the

<sup>6</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', pp. 163-4. Regarding the Lue courting see Rispaud, 'Sur une tribu', pp. 745-7.

<sup>7</sup> Le May, *An Asian Arcady*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-2.

<sup>9</sup> Schouten, 'A Description', pp. 107-8.

statement that the go-betweens should be women of good name and reputation. The date of birth of bride and groom was taken into account and an astrologer's advice was sought. The prospective groom visited the house of the girl three times, carrying betel and fruit, and at the third visit relations of both sides appeared and counted the 'portion of the bride' and what was given to the bridegroom. The groom's family build a house for the new couple in the compound of the bride's parents, where they stayed a few months before building a house for themselves. Some people said that the prospective groom had to work half a year with his future parents-in-law, but others denied the truth of this.<sup>10</sup>

The Thai of central Thailand still consider that a man ought to marry into the house of his bride's parents. In a modern Thai village, Visser found that this rule still applied.<sup>11</sup> In the elaborate marriage ceremony, the groom's side sends an emissary to discuss betrothal, and this person carries two ritual containers, one with eight or more areca nuts and four clusters of eight betel leaves, and the other containing unhusked rice, puffed rice, green peas, sesame seed, leaves with auspicious names and some money. On the day of the marriage, which has to be determined with the help of an astrologer, the groom is brought in procession to the bride's parents' house. Upon entering the compound the groom first goes to the altar of the spirit of the soil and announces his intention, and then proceeds to the house. There his way is obstructed by some people holding a metal belt so as to form a 'gate' and the groom has to pay some money (in 1968 this was five or ten baht) before he can pass. Children sometimes make a game of this, repeatedly obstructing his way and making him pay some money over and over again whilst he nears the stairway of the house. At the foot of the ladder the groom meets a red whetstone (or in case such a stone could not be found an ordinary stone covered with a banana leaf can be used) and here his feet are washed. This costs him (1968 prices) another five or ten baht. All these payments are wrapped in red paper. Long stalks of sugarcane carried in the procession are placed on either side of the stairway which has been decorated with umbrellas and paper.

Members of his family have carried three ritual containers wrapped in cloth, two holding a number of at least eight areca nuts, betel leaves and other substances such as the ones described with the betrothal. The third container (*khan sui soot*) has the bride price and also green peas, uncooked rice, puffed rice and auspicious leaves. The cloth is put away removed from the areca nut containers as soon as these have been placed in the house and the bride price is spread out on a cloth. This money is counted before witnesses and perfume is sprinkled over it as well as the sesame seed, peas, uncooked rice and puffed rice. The areca nuts and the brideprice are exhibited at the most honourable eastern end of the house where the spirits of the ancestors may be expected to witness the procedure. The bride and groom sit together, the bride on the left, groom on the right, light some incense and donate this to the ancestors. On one occasion in 1969, there were two boiled chickens, two bottles of whisky, two dishes holding four

<sup>10</sup> De la Loubère, *The Kingom of Siam, Travels in Thailand*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Utrecht University 1735. See also Rajadhorn, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> A. P. R. Visser, *Een Dorp in de Centrale Essays on Thai Folklore*, pp. 255-7.

parties, the betrothal is formalised with the envoys bringing flowers, candles, betel nuts and cigarettes.<sup>15</sup> Then the amount of the bride price (*khaa dong*) and the money which will be offered to the ancestor spirits of the bride's family (*khaa khun phu*) can be determined. The size of the bride price fluctuates according to the region, the wealth of the families and the type of marriage. The *khaa khun phu* is mentioned in the legal code and ranges from 'ten piastres for a girl of lower condition to one hundred and fifty piastres for the daughter of a high official'.<sup>16</sup>

The bride-price is carried over to the girl's house on the day before the actual wedding, in a procession with a hundred (sometimes two hundred) betel quids and tobacco, as well as cakes, meats and fish, all of these covered with big paper cones placed upside down. Zago mentions trays with flowers, candles, betel quids and cigarettes and foods for the next day, such as meat, fish and cakes.<sup>17</sup> Normally speaking all these gifts are carried by young women. On arrival at the foot of the stairs, the cortege is held up and a ritual question-and-answer game is enacted in which the purpose of the visit is described at length. A *khwan* binding ritual is held for bride and groom separately, each in their own ancestral house, and Buddhist monks may chant sacred texts on the eve of the actual wedding day.

In the morning the bride and groom sit together and sacrificial water is sprinkled abundantly over them. In the afternoon the groom's procession from his parents' home to that of his bride takes place. After arriving at the stairs he must pay some money for the right of entrance and have his feet washed, 'on a stone covered with the leaves of a banana plant or some other plant'.<sup>18</sup> The first act upon entry in the house is the groom's prostration before the ancestors, whereby the couple together lift the tray with the *khaa khun phu*. Then a *khwan* ritual for the couple takes place, the groom on the right, bride on the left whereby the ritual specialist, after his lengthy perforation carefully divides a boiled egg in two by pulling a thread through the middle,<sup>19</sup> and bride and groom eat these halves (in some areas of Laos the egg is not divided and two eggs are used, one for the bride, one for the groom). Then the ritual specialist binds their wrists, the groom's right wrist to the bride's left. All parents, notables and old people attending the ceremony may come forward to twist some white cotton around the couple's wrists. Then the prostration of the newly-wed couple to the ancestors and a small offering for the Buddha image take place. The wedding is concluded by a ceremonial entering of the bridal chamber, led by a woman of excellent repute. The couple is left alone for a few instants and then joins the concluding festivities.

#### *h) Neua*

When a young man wishes to propose to a girl, his parents will have to send an emissary, a person well-versed in customs and lore, who will carry

<sup>15</sup> Thao Nhouy Abhay, 'Marriage Rites' in R. de Berval (editor), *Kingdom of Laos*, Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See also Nguyen Phu Doe, 'Les rites du mariage Lao et du mariage Viet-Nam', *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume*

*Lao*, Volume 1, April-June 1970, pp. 51-70.

<sup>17</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, pp. 224-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234. Note the similarity with the *som khom* ritual of the Khamyang people described in Chapter 3.

two packets of betel, two packets of chewing-bark, forty-fifty banana-leaf cones with boiled rice, approximately one-and-a-half piastre in money, two dresses and a piece of silk.<sup>20</sup> These gifts will be presented to the girl's family on a copper plate, and with many circumlocutions and general statements about marriage the intermediary makes the purpose of the visit clear. If the presents are not returned a further approach may be made after a proper time interval. This time he carries some fifty bamboo containers with rice-wine, a similar number of banana-leaf cones with rice, three packets of betel and three packets of chewing bark. If this approach also does not meet with a negative response, the betrothal ceremony may be prepared. This time the presents consist of seventy or eighty tubes of rice wine, four dresses, a piece of silk, a piece of cotton, three or four piastres, a hundred banana-leaf cones of boiled rice, a pig and a jar of rice-wine. The pig is killed and a festive meal takes place during which the betrothal is officially announced. The young man should stay and work for a period of some ten days in the household of his prospective parents-in-law, and such periods of work may be repeated several times before the actual marriage takes place.

At the marriage itself the number of tubes of fermented drink may exceed a hundred and the number of cones of rice and betel nuts will increase similarly. In case the marriage is amongst high-ranking families, one or more buffaloes will be killed as well as some pigs. When the groom and his party arrive the young girls of the village espouse their coming from hiding places and bombard the procession with soft fruit which has been drenched in an evil-smelling liquid. The men will try to find shelter in the bride's house but will find the gate barred and several guests may find themselves captured and having to pay ransom to be freed. If some of the presents which were carried in procession have been lost to the young women, these also have to be bought back. The young women can provoke another battle when the buffalo or pig has been killed and the men go and wash the entrails in the river. The maidens will follow them and splash them with water.

In the bride's house the amount of the bride-price will be discussed and if the bride's family is very unhappy with the amount brought the marriage may still be cancelled. At the beginning of this century, a price of ten or twelve bars of silver would be paid for a girl of high rank, but the ordinary price for a girl of good standing was five bars. In addition there were three big copper containers, a piece of silk, a quantity of eggs, a sack of sesame seed, fish and millet. The bride would bring her jewelry, and various pieces of bedding, such as mattresses, pillows and mosquito nets. Once the bride price has been settled and accepted, there will be a *khuan* ceremony for the couple. Bride and groom will face a plate on which two eggs and a chicken are placed and between them is a jar of rice-wine. The ritual specialist places himself in front and takes a plate with an egg in each hand and offers the plates simultaneously to bride and groom whilst crossing his arms. In the same manner, which indicates the union of the couple, he presents them with two chicken's legs. Two reeds are placed in the jar of wine and bride and groom must cross these reeds before taking a pull. Good wishes are then voiced by the ritual specialist and the couple may consider them-

<sup>20</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 365. The ethnographic data, collected at the beginning following account is based upon Bourlet's of this century.

selves wed. The first to be told of the happy event are the ancestor spirits. The groom offers a dish with gifts to these spirits and prostrates himself three times before presenting himself to the senior members of the bride's family.

On an auspicious hour the bride will have to say farewell to her parents and commence her journey to her husband's family home. Often the departure will be dramatically staged and the bride will hide herself and be compelled to leave the house and family where she grew up. When the couple arrive at the groom's house, a senior member of that family receives them and washes their feet. He may keep the ritual bowl which he uses during this occasion. The couple must take pains to cross the threshold simultaneously; if one steps forward first it is a sign that that person will be the first to die. A festive meal and presentation to the groom's ancestors form part of the reception.

An interesting variant, recorded for the Phuthai of northeastern Thailand who probably originated not far from the region of the Neua,<sup>21</sup> mentions the use of go-betweens, armed with a basket of rice and one containing betel and siri leaves. Marriage gifts consist of two of each of these baskets plus bananas and sugar cane. In addition the groom's family provide four baskets containing four eggs each and twenty baskets with betel, the girl's family produces four jars of liquor and the girl's ancestral spirits are invited to accept the offerings. Further sacrifices take place and the bride can from then on only worship her husband's ancestral spirits. The bride's family will continue to request periodical sacrifices for many years.<sup>22</sup>

### i) Black Tai

The most detailed description of traditional marriage rituals for the Black Tai is probably by Pedersen who studied a group who were living in central Thailand but who had retained many of their traditional customs.<sup>23</sup> When a young man's family wishes to open negotiations they send an intermediary with presents in the form of betel, tobacco, some victuals and, if they can afford it, a gold ring or necklace. If the proposal is accepted, in due course wedding details such as bride price and dowry would be discussed. Elderly people told Pedersen that the custom of bride price was relatively recent and that formerly it was possible for men to work for lengthy periods for their future parents-in-law (up to five or six years) in order to gain a bride.

The marriage has to take place on an auspicious day. The groom goes in procession to the bride's house, clad in traditional festive attire, complete with a knife in his belt. The go-betweens carry the bride price. The sealing of the marriage traditionally consists of a ceremonial exchange of betel between the two young people, the presentation of the bride price and its acceptance in the presence of witnesses.

An important part of the wedding ceremony is also the presentation of the young man to the spirits of the forefathers. Elder men of the family summon these spirits and inform them that the young man is

<sup>21</sup> Lebar et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> Pedersen, 'Aspects of Women's Life', pp. 109-13.

<sup>23</sup> Seidenfaden, 'Regarding the Customs, Manners, Economics and Languages',

pp. 130-6.

now to be adopted into the family and has promised to show them the respect due to them. As a sign of veneration and in confirmation of the words of the ancients, the young people bend three times in a deep *wor* [prostration] to the spirits of the ancestors in the closed room of the house in which they reside.<sup>24</sup>

In the evening the go-betweens lead the couple to the bridal room where the mattresses were placed side by side under a common mosquito net. Later, in the house of the bridegroom's parents, the young bride will venerate his ancestors and promise to respect them.

Hickey, surveying customs of various ethnic groups in northern Vietnam reports for the Black Tai the custom of spending a period working in the house of the future parents-in-law, in some cases up to ten years of service. After marriage the couple normally should settle in the groom's parents household if no other married children live there, otherwise the married couple may settle anywhere.<sup>25</sup> Regarding ritual details, Zago mentions that the Black Tai bride couple must share a meal, drink some alcoholic beverage from a single cup, have the wedding announced officially and are presented with proper gifts to the ancestors.<sup>26</sup> Other accounts regarding marriage customs of the Black Tai describe them as identical to those of the White Tai.<sup>27</sup>

#### j) White Tai

One form of initiating a betrothal is to partake at the springtime festival during which marriageable men and women are divided into two camps, boys throw a ball at each other, if a girl catches the ball she may thereby instigate betrothal ceremonies with the family of the boy who threw that ball.<sup>28</sup> In any case, instigated by the ball game or not, the betrothal takes place via an intermediary sent from the young man's family who carries a tray with areca nuts. If the gift is accepted a few days later the details may be discussed. If the man's family is rich they may decide to pay the bride price in a lump sum, else it has to be decided that the young man works for a period of one or two years with his future parents-in-law.<sup>29</sup>

On the day of the marriage the intermediary walks in front, followed by the groom and people carrying the gifts. At the house they prostrate themselves before the girl's parents and are received in the house. Whilst a pig is cooked, the father of the bride will lift the tray with betel nuts up to the ancestors, and the groom, accompanied by his intermediary, will be introduced to them. There follows a meal and then the procession returns to the groom's parents' house taking the bride, her emissary and her parents. At that house the bride will be introduced to the ancestors of her husband and her husband's parents and a festive meal concludes the ritual. Normally speaking the bride will live in the house of her husband's family.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> G. C. Hickey, *Social Systems of Northern Viet Nam, A Study of Systems in Contact*, Unpublished Ph D dissertation, University of Chicago, 1958, pp. 157-8.

<sup>26</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies*, p. 220, fn. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, p. 75 and Maspero, 'Moeurs et coutumes', p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Hickey, *Social Systems* mentions three years.

<sup>30</sup> Maspero, 'Moeurs et coutumes', p. 240.

A detailed description comes from early in the twentieth century, when Silvestre reported on the White Tai of Phong-tho.<sup>31</sup> He describes the approach of the intermediaries, sent by the young man's family and the discussions regarding the settlement. In Phong-tho a young man has to live in the household of his future parents-in law for a period which varies between seven and ten years before he can claim his bride, and seldom do the girl's parents agree to receive money instead. The exact period of servitude is fixed during the betrothal discussions. The beginning of his period of servitude must fall on an auspicious day and in the evening of such a day the young man, preceded by his intermediaries and followed by many members of his family, but not by his parents, goes to his temporary home. There the door is strongly barricaded and children may hurl fruit and red ants at the party. The intermediary negotiates entry and for a sum of money the door is opened. The future son-in-law prostrates himself before the girl's parents and the presents for the festive meal are unpacked by the girl's mother. The girl's ancestors are informed and the young man bows politely before all senior members of the family.

On the actual wedding day, a feast is prepared for the bride's ancestors, and pigs and betel are offered. All relatives, including the parents of the groom, eat and drink throughout the day and around five o'clock in the afternoon the groom can take his bride away, after an exchange of presents has taken place. For four or five years the newly-weds may stay in the household of the groom's parents and then they set up their own home.

#### k) Red Tai

The elaborate marriage rituals begin with the arrival at the girl's house of a male emissary who brings a tray covered with presents such as distilled alcohol, Chinese tea, betel, chewing bark, glutinous rice cooked in banana-leaf cones and often some money.<sup>32</sup> If the go-between reports a favourable response, the young man's family will send him again, having allowed a few months to pass so as to give the girl's family ample time to deliberate. During the second visit the intermediary brings somewhat more important presents, such as glutinous rice, chewing bark, and forty or fifty tubes of '*pa rum*' (river fish mixed with salt and rice powder and preserved in a segment of bamboo). After another interval the official betrothal takes place. Again the envoy from the young man's family arrives, accompanied by some eighty tubes of *pa rum*, four dresses, a piece of silk, a roll of cotton, a hundred cones of glutinous rice, a pig, one or more jars of rice-wine and some money. This time the girl's family is represented by its own intermediary. After a sumptuous repast the two families are allied. Not long afterwards the young man's family may pay another visit to thank the girl's family for having accepted the proposal.

The Red Tai have a separate occasion for the prospective groom to present himself at the house of his fiancée. Led by his go-between and followed by his parents, friends and servants he carries one or more bars of silver, a robe and a vest, silver bracelets, distilled alcohol, tea, a buffalo

<sup>31</sup> Silvestre, 'Les Thai blancs', pp. 30-2. ceremony have been taken from Robert,

<sup>32</sup> All details of the Red Tai marriage Notes, pp. 43-50.

or a pig, areci and betel, glutinous rice, cakes, and some thirty tubes of *pa xum*. Young girls will bombard them with fruits and douse them with water so as to prevent them from entering and therefore the main guests will be allowed to enter via a back door. The others will have to pay a small sum to be let through. The young man is presented to the girl's parents and the ancestors of the house. From this moment onwards he may freely visit the house and can participate in the work as a member of the family. Meanwhile the girl prepares her trousseau consisting of pillows, blankets, mosquito nets and mattresses, equal to the value of the bride price which will be presented in bars of silver, and to which must be added copper containers, a sabre, a buffalo, glutinous rice, betel, etc.

The actual wedding takes place on an auspicious day. The bride is conducted in a procession to the house of the groom and when she arrives there the groom's go-between wishes the feet of the natal couple before they climb the stairs. Women beat the bride to the nuptial chamber where they throw many pillows under the mosquito net, thus wishing her many children. A ritual specialist then conducts a ceremony in which the *khwans* of the bridal couple are strengthened. Then the bride and groom eat some cakes and drink some alcohol together under the gaze of the family members. The bride prostrates herself before the altar of the ancestors, before her parents-in-law and other senior members of her husband's family. Then she is ceremonially taught to do some work by making a few perfunctory sweeps with a broom and feeding the livestock. Afterwards two eggs and a chicken are placed on a tray and next to it a jar with rice wine and two straws. The ritual specialist ties the two eggs and presents them to bride and groom with crossed arms and a few good wishes and sound advice of the leader of the ceremony conclude the elaborate marriage rites.

### 1) Tho

Abadie provides us with some details of the Tho marriage ceremony.<sup>23</sup> The father of a marrable young man selects a prospective partner for his son and sends a male ritual specialist, carrying 'food gifts' to the girl's family. If the answer is favourable, the two young persons' horoscopes are compared and it is noted whether they will be compatible. When the astrological dictum is satisfactory further details such as the bride price, are arranged. The bride price may be so high that several years may elapse before it has been paid by the young man's family. On the other hand, the poor man may avoid paying for a rich bride simply by having himself completely adopted into the girl's family.

The wedding presents consist of food cloth, jewelry, bars of silver and a pair of shoes. On the day before the marriage the groom goes to the girl's house, accompanied by two elders and two go-betweens and when he arrives he finds the door barred with a silken thread. He has to drink some alcohol before he is allowed to cut the string and enter the house. There he prostrates himself before the altar of the ancestors and partakes in a festive meal. On the actual wedding day he comes again to the bride's house, and this time the meal is interrupted by a lengthy ceremony during which the

<sup>23</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, pp. 49-51.

groom bows deeply before his parents-in-law as well as all invited guests. The bride then takes leave of the ancestors of her house, puts on the shoes which were offered as a wedding present and goes to her husband's parents' house where she is received by the intermediary and led before the altar and her parents-in-law to prostrate herself.

The day after the marriage, Abadie tells us laconically, all sorts of festivities take place, and the day after that the couple bow down together before the ancestor altar of the bride's family. The actual setting up of a separate household takes place only after the bride falls pregnant. If this has not happened within a period of three years the contract may be considered broken.

### m) Other 'eastern groups'

A few short remarks were found on the Nung, the Nhang and the Pai-i. The Nung, just like the Tho, have the young bride only settle with her husband after she becomes pregnant. Amongst the Nhang, the girl settles immediately with her new husband and the same is said for the Pai-i.<sup>11</sup>

### *Analysis*

Much of the information on Tai marriage ceremonies described in the previous section has been brought together in Table 9. The following pages provide comments and annotations on the different aspects of these marriage rituals. The first item is the tossing of a pillow or a ball, by which a young man and girl can open up betrothal discussions. This ritual was only found amongst two Tai groups, one living on the border between Burma and Yunnan, and the other in northern Vietnam. The fact that it is not reported for any of the other groups makes it unlikely that it was part of the Ancient Tai ceremonies. It appears more likely that these two groups of Tai speakers have borrowed the tossing ritual from other ethnic groups. Ball games between young men and women seem to be very common amongst various ethnic minority groups in southern China.<sup>12</sup>

The use of go-betweens is a very common feature of the elaborate ceremonies. It is so widespread that we can safely assume that it formed part of the elaborate rituals of the Ancient Tai. Only on two occasions do we find a definitive preference for women intermediaries, namely amongst the Phakey and the That. For the other groups it sometimes does not matter whether the go-betweens are male or female, but in most cases it should be one or more men. In all cases the representative must be a person of good standing who can be expected to state his (or her) case with traditional circumlocution. It seems to be a custom by which one family can begin negotiations with another without running the risk of losing too much face if the overtures are unsuccessful. It is also a safeguard against being asked an exorbitant bride price, for the go-between will be able to draw upon traditional precedents. In Chapter 2 we have already pointed out that Ancient Tai society was made up of exogamous patrilineal clans,

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-6, p. 90 and p. 95.

*Mountains*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, Plates

<sup>12</sup> Chindarsi, *The Religion of the Hmong* 2c and 3a.  
*Njua*, p. 69; W. R. Geddes, *Migrants of the*

LAOS-TAI MARRIAGE RITUALS

Ahom	Assam-Tai	Shan	Lue	Yuan	Thai	South-ern Tai	Lao-tian	Meua	Black Tai	White Tai	Red Tai	Tho
Tossing ritual	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	f	n
Use of go-between	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	f	f
At betrothal	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
use of areca	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
tobacco	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
ring	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
rice	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
sesame	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
peas	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
alcohol	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
cloth	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
chewing bark	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Groom's service	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Use of astrology	n	f	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Bathing or washing	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
Wedding at bride's	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
Ritual barrier	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
At wedding	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
use of bride price	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
areca	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
eggs	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
linen	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
tobacco	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
weapou	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n
sesame	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
peas	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
alcohol	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
cloth	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
salt	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
fruit	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
shoes	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
Ancestors invoked	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n	f	f	n
Meat gifts	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
Khwan ritual	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n	f	f	n
Teaching bride	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n
Domicile at groom's	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	n	f	f	n

n = not found in the literature  
f = found

and that the widespread use of go-betweens may also reflect the ancient rule that a man had to select a bride from outside his own clan.

The go-between often carries areca nuts and betel leaves. Throughout Southeast Asia it is customary to begin every deliberation with a serving of areca nuts and betel leaves. The fact that the intermediary carries betel with him is symbolical of the fact that he carries a message, it is he who wishes to open negotiations. The custom is extremely old in Southeast Asia. Already in the second century B.C. the Chinese recorded the areca palm as one of the interesting trees found in the region now known as Vietnam. A few centuries later the Chinese describe how these nuts are wrapped in betel leaves and eaten with a bit of lime, and when visitors come they must be offered this delicacy which tastes delicious, which causes the breath to go deeper and which helps the digestion.<sup>66</sup> During the first millennium the custom spread over southern China and by the twelfth century it was widespread in Fukien and Kwangtung and the areas further southwards.<sup>67</sup> The fact that areca nuts and betel leaves are so important in this Tai ritual (as well as in many others) indicates that it was part of the Ancient Tai tradition in the first millennium and that this aspect may be seen as one of the indications of a Southeast Asian substratum<sup>68</sup> in Tai culture.

There is no clear pattern amongst the other gifts the go-between may carry. The use of chewing bark amongst the Neua and Red Tai is probably similar to that of betel, namely an ingredient used during initiations, and Chinese tea may also fulfil that function. The bringing of alcoholic beverages amongst the Tai of Vietnam could be a custom adopted relatively recently, for this seems to be typical for many non-Tai minority groups in Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> The formal use of tobacco amongst the Phayao also does not seem a typically Tai feature. At any rate, tobacco was not yet introduced into Southeast Asia at the time of the Ancient Tai culture. Other gifts, such as a ring (Shan), money (Thai), cloth (Neua and Red Tai) seem simply items of value, brought to show that the young man's family is serious in their intentions.

For seven different groups we record a period of a prospective groom's service with his future parents-in-law, varying in length from a few days to ten years. There are indications that this work may be regarded as service in lieu of a bride price. The fact that this custom is fairly widespread may have bearing on the custom of three Tai groups to have a groom stay to work with his parents-in-law after the marriage ceremony has been concluded. It is possible that this practice has arisen as a payment of the bride price 'in instalments'. We will return to this point when discussing the domiciliary rules in detail.

<sup>66</sup> J. J. M. de Groot, 'Iets naders omtrent de Verbreiding en de Geschiedenis van het betel kauwen', *Feestbundel van Taal-, Letter-, Geschied- en Aardrijkskundige Bijdragen ter gelegenheid van zijn tachtigsten geboortedag van Dr. P. J. Veth*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1894, pp. 265-72.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>68</sup> There is little doubt that 'betel chewing' originated in Southeast Asia. It was intro-

duced to India probably not earlier than the first or second century A.D. See O. Prakash, *Food and Drinks in Ancient India*, Delhi: Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1961, p. 129 and 162; or N. M. Penzer (editor), *The Ocean of Story*, Vol. VIII, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1968, pp. 248-9.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, G. Condominas, *Nous avons mangé la forêt de la pierre-génie*, *Gao*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1957.

The checking of the birthday of bride and groom and the avoidance of inauspicious times when fixing a date for the wedding ceremony is widespread. It seems likely that in the Ancient Tai ritual the astrologer must have played a role.

Regarding ritual bathing, there are four types mentioned in the literature. The Ahom and Shan bride and groom take a formal bath before or on the day of the marriage, the Thai, Southern Tai and Laotians as well as the Black Tai perform a ritual washing of the feet. Amongst the Thai, Southern Tai and Laotians there is in addition a lavish sprinkling of the couple with water that has been blessed by Buddhist monks. Finally, both the Black Tai and the Red Tai douse the groom's party with water. These four types of activities appear quite unrelated. The Shan bathing is probably an elaboration of the careful grooming and dressing of the bridal couple. The ritual washing of the feet is quite a different activity, it is a gesture of welcome extended to honoured guests. The sprinkling with lustral water is a typical Buddhist custom which is performed on many occasions other than marriage. It is possible that the sprinkling during the wedding ritual has only recently been introduced and that this was originally part of the ritual of entering a new house.<sup>10</sup> The dousing with water whilst food is prepared, or when the groom's party has arrived at the bride's house seems an elaboration on the theme of providing a ritual barrier which will be discussed below.

Regarding the location of the main wedding ceremony, it is quite clear from the ethnographic survey that the Tai celebrate the wedding at the bride's parents' home. It is there that the bride price is received and shown to the ancestors and senior members of the family.

Amongst seven different Tai groups, the groom's procession arriving at the wedding feast is met with obstructions. The Thai children who playfully hold a thread in the way of the groom and the Naga girls who barricade themselves behind the door appear to enact the same ritual, one whereby the groom has to demonstrate his eagerness and persistence before he is allowed near his partner.<sup>11</sup> Possibly the inclusion of weapons in the groom's attire or amongst the wedding paraphernalia (Ahom, Lue, Black Tai, and Red Tai) is related to a show of force and bravery as part of his demonstration. On the other hand, the inclusion of weapons may symbolise the groom's manliness and his willingness to protect his new bride. The second possibility is indicated by the Khamyai ritual with a spear as well as by that of the Ahom and the author tends to favour it above the hypothetical force to cross the barriers put up in front of the procession. It is usual to bribe the way through.

The payment of a sum of money, silver bars or a valuable draught animal by the groom's family to that of the bride's family has amongst Tai peoples, at least during the elaborate ceremonies, which are held when two wealthy families are linked through marriage. Only amongst the Red Tai do we find mention of a girl's trousseau being given to the gods brought in by the groom's family. In all other cases the custom is considerably

<sup>10</sup> Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, of Northeastern India where the groom's party is doused with an irritating liquid, p. 161.

<sup>11</sup> A parallel is found amongst the Kacharis. See S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, pp. 45-6.

more than the bride. The custom of paying a bride price is related to the fact that the young man's family must be the party to ask for a betrothal; the groom's side is supplicating and must overcome the ritual resistance of the bride's family with impressive gifts. The ritual barrier set up outside the bride's house forms part of the same idea. As we shall see later, the fact that most Tai take the bride away from her family and introduce her into that of her husband indicates that the bride price is traditionally also a compensation for the loss of a daughter.

For all Tai groups, areca nuts and betel leaves form virtually an essential item amongst the gifts presented to the bride's family. The likelihood of areca nuts and betel leaves to have been part of the Ancient Tai ritual has already been discussed. Amongst the paraphernalia there are various food gifts such as cakes, millet, and rice which seem to indicate simply that the groom has prepared at least some of the festive meal in which the two families partake during the wedding. Gifts such as tea and tobacco may be an elaboration on the areca nut and betel-leaf theme. Cotton, silk and the like may be seen as part of the bride price. There are two items amongst the paraphernalia which seem to have a special meaning. In the first place, amongst five different groups, eggs have a rather prominent position. The Khamti must include eggs in their *wang khai*, the Shan must display four eggs. Amongst the Laotians, the Neua and the Red Tai eggs are often used by the ritual specialist who recites sacred words and the couple may eat them. In our opinion, the use of eggs possibly did form part of the Ancient elaborate wedding ritual, and it formed part of the *khwan* ceremony which was held in such a way that the *khwan*s of bride and groom were ritually blended. Amongst many Tai peoples who do not use eggs there is still a *khwan* ceremony during which the wrists of bride and groom are tied. The second item which requires further notice is the use of salted fish. The Phakey call it *paa suam* and it would be interesting to find out whether the *pa suam* of the Red Tai is etymologically related. Packets of salted fish are conspicuous amongst three groups of Tai, but not amongst most others and thus with the information at present available it seems hasty to assume that this formed part of the Ancient ritual. We have not found packets of salted fish amongst wedding rituals of other ethnic groups. Naturally it is possible, though unlikely, that the fish simply forms part of the ordinary food gifts needed to feed the guests and that no special meaning should be attached to its inclusion amongst the paraphernalia.

An aspect of both betrothal and wedding gifts is the fact that often a traditionally fixed amount is brought. Repeatedly we find mention of 'fourteen rupees' (Khamti), 'two salt fish', 'four eggs' (Shan), eight areca nuts and four bundles of eight betel leaves (Thai), 'ten packets of pickled fish' (Phakey), 'two times twelve rupees' (Lue), 'forty or fifty cones of rice' or 'eighty tubes of rice wine' (Neua) and 'containers with eighty and some with one hundred areca nuts' (Khasi). These and many more examples demonstrate that it is not the exact amount which matters, but that it should be an even amount, indicating that there are two parties coming together. Indeed, the even number is important in some of the astrological calculations.<sup>12</sup> In line with this principle, we often

<sup>12</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 148.

come across 'two fistfuls of betel leaves', or 'two chickens' or 'two eggs'. The careful reader will immediately object that there are repeated occasions where an uneven number is prominent: three ritual containers, and a hundred-and-one eggs, for example. It is our opinion that these cases need to be discussed separately. Three containers during the wedding ceremony usually consist of two containers with areca nuts and a third holding the bride price, thereby stressing again the even number of ritual objects holding areca nuts, to which the bride price has been added. All the remaining cases of uneven numbers are made up of specific type of even number *plus one*, such as twenty-one, thirty-one, forty-one... up to a hundred-and-one. It is probably a custom that has arisen from the wish to bring 'more than' twenty, thirty, forty... or one hundred. Regarding the ceremonial detail of the prostration before the ancestors, this is reported for almost all Tai groups. Indeed, it seems that the involvement of the house spirits forms the core of the whole marriage ceremony. When describing central Thai marriages I once observed: 'the elementary, essential marriage ceremony consists of a ritual during which the spirits of the ancestors are informed of the fact that a certain couple will be husband and wife.'<sup>13</sup> The evidence for other Tai groups suggests that this observation may well be extended to cover the Ancient Tai wedding ceremony.

For five groups there is evidence of an animal sacrifice during the presentation of the groom to the bride's ancestors. The offering of a pig's head amongst the Tai of southern Thailand is a clear instance of a pre-Buddhist custom in thin disguise. There seems to be no fixed rule for the type of sacrifice needed. Sometimes we come across a couple of chickens, sometimes a pig and on other occasions a buffalo is killed. The size and value of the sacrifice is probably a reflection of the wealth and importance of the parties involved.

Most Tai groups perform a *khwan* ceremony during the elaborate marriage rituals and a wrist binding with white cotton thread is widespread. There is little doubt that the cotton crown of Thai bride and groom is but a variant of the wrist binding that is common amongst most other Tai. The fact that the *khwan* ritual is so widespread does not only indicate the likelihood of it having been an aspect of the Ancient Tai marriage ceremony, but also it is additional evidence of the importance of this ceremony for the Ancient Tai in general, which was one of the findings in Chapter 4.

There are six groups amongst whom a formal 'teaching of the bride' has been reported. It is not too farfetched to relate the handing of a broom, immediately after the bride has been introduced to the groom's family to the statement by a representative of the bride's family amongst the Assamese Tai that the bride is yet untrained and ought to be taught tasks in the new household. The recurrence of such statement can be an indication of a formal transference of the bride from the residence of the family where she was born to that of her husband. A related aspect is the preponderance of cases where the bride settles at the 'parents' residence immediately after the marriage ceremony has taken place. This 'paternal' residence may come as a surprise to most researchers familiar with Thai, Lao, Lue and Nua culture. It has generally been assumed that the groom

<sup>13</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 146.

## 6

### RITUALS CONCERNING DEATH AMONGST THE ASSAMESE TAI

In this chapter the funeral ceremonies of the Assamese Tai will be described. The information has been organised under two headings. First come the customs regarding the disposal of corpses in the case of an expected demise of an elderly person. Secondly exceptional cases are described, both the accidental or violent death of an inauspicious nature and the death of the most honoured members of the community, namely the Buddhist monks.

#### THE EXPECTED DEMISE

##### 1) Khamyang

When an elderly, respected member of the community dies, the people of Chalapathar Khamyang village first wash the corpse with turmeric water and tie the thumbs and toes with thread. Objects such as betel nut or coins are not placed in the mouth, but are wrapped in the corner of a piece of cloth which is given to the deceased. The corpse is placed in a coffin, and in former times, at meal times, an individual could knock on the coffin to catch the dead person's attention. The coffin is attached with a thread to the ancestor's house post (*sao phu nam*) and remains attached to this pole until to the moment it is ready to leave the house. The coffin is hermetically sealed and there are no specific rules as to the direction of the coffin during the period that it rests at home. The period of remaining at home may last up to seven days. The coffin is covered with a white cloth, and in former times paper flowers were placed on the coffin before the white cloth was hung over it.

The coffin leaves the house via a stairway especially constructed for that purpose. The eldest son of the deceased leads the way to the cemetery. The coffin hangs from one bamboo pole if the dead person was unmarried and from two poles if he or she was married, and these poles are carried on the bearers' shoulders. It is the rule that the coffin is transported in such a way that the corpse moves feet first. Women follow the coffin closely. Some flowers, puffed rice and coins may be scattered about.

The burial site has been chosen by the village headman. The grave must be directed towards the northwest and is about three or four feet deep. Some thorny branches are swept through the newly dug grave just before the coffin is lowered. If the dead person is a woman the coffin is placed sideways so that she lies on her left side; in the case of a man it is positioned

<sup>1</sup> According to the Very Reverend Sisana-bangsha this is still a custom amongst the Phakey but has been abandoned at Chalapathar (personal communication Chalapathar village, 3 January 1979).

related to the story of the tresses of the Lord Buddha and therefore they can be seen as a 'ticket to enter heaven'. When the objects are placed in the dead person's hands they are accompanied with the instruction: 'Do not give these tokens to anyone but Culamani at the gate of heaven'.<sup>4</sup>

Outside the house where a person has died a pole is posted and a banner is attached. This is called *hang kao*. It is a sign to the community that something serious has occurred and thus serves as a public notice. In Powai Mukh, on a day that a death occurs it is *wan kam*, a taboo day, for the whole village and all work has to be stopped. There will be no dehusking of rice and no cooking. The second day is also *wan kam*, but only for members of the same patrilineal clan as the deceased. The first day of mourning is called *kam mung* and the second *kam steng*. The banner which announces the death will be carried by the eldest son, or in case the deceased has only daughters, by his eldest son-in-law during the cortège.

The second son (or son-in-law) carries fire. But before the procession to the cemetery can set out the coffin has to be removed from the house. A corner of the house is broken open so that the coffin need not leave via the door. When leaving the house, as well as during the cortège the coffin must move in such a way that the corpse's feet point in the direction of the movement. A married person's coffin is suspended from two bamboo poles, but unmarried people are moved hanging from a single pole. During the procession no rope is attached to the coffin.

The exact position of the burial is selected by a village elder and here a grave is dug. The grave's head must point to the east, the feet towards the west. When the grave has been dug, some thorny branches may be waved through it to dispel evil spirits. In contrast with Chalapathar, both men and women are placed in the grave in a supine position. The custom of turning males on the right side and females on the left is unknown amongst the Khamyang of Powai Mukh. Near the grave a *taan khon* is placed. This is a tall bamboo pole which has been provided near the top with one or two cross bars. On one end of the lower cross bar a white banner, which is held open by means of small bamboo slats and is provided with a tassel at the end, is attached. In case only one cross bar is used, an image of a bird may be found on the pole's top. In case there are two cross bars these are connected in the shape of a trapeze (see figure 4). The section of the *taan khon* where the cross bars are fixed is called *kong kak*. Seven days after the death occurred, a small ceremony is held at the foot of the *taan khon* during which the ritual specialist will send the *khons* of the dead person to heaven. Unlike the Phakey ritual, described later in this chapter, the Powai Mukh people do not offer money or pour sour rice water at the foot of such a big *taan khon* during the ceremony of sending the *khon* to the other world. Powai Mukh informants also told that the *taan khon* for men is identical to that for women.

Just outside Powai Mukh Buddhist monastery a plot of land is surrounded by a sturdy fence and in the middle of this plot of land a pyramidal structure can be found. It consists of nine layers of sand, held into place by bamboo lattice-work. In the centre a strong pole rises up to a height of some eight metres above the ground surface. This pyramid is provided

<sup>4</sup> Compare Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 257.

FIG. 4 : Three *taan khons*<sup>a</sup>

with a multitude of the miniature *taan khon* and *wa caa ku*. On either side of the pyramid a tall bamboo pole stands up, one carrying the decoration of a bird, the other with a depiction of an aeroplane (see figure 5). At the time the pyramid was observed it had been neglected for several months and most of the small *taan khon* and *wa caa ku* decorations had lost their paper decorations or had fallen over. Weeds had started to grow over the pyramid and the tall bamboo poles had lost their long white banners but some of the ropes which held these banners could still be seen.

This whole monument is called *kong mu*. It need not be fixed near the monastery like it is at present. Any place at the edge of the village may be chosen and a place near the edge of a river is considered extremely suitable. It is a ritual object which is used twice a year in Powai Mukh, namely at the end of the traditional New Year

FIG. 5 : The *kong mu* at Powai Mukh

<sup>a</sup> After a photograph taken by the author in village near the Buddhist monastery of Borphakey

festival in April and at the end of the Buddhist Lenten season around September. At that time the *kong mu* is cleaned up and repaired, or if the *kong mu* is beyond repair a new one is made.

On these two annual occasions many white banners are hung from the tall poles on either side of the pyramid and the *kong mu* is decorated with a multitude of miniature *taan khon* and *wat caa ku* sticks. All the villagers will assemble and the leaders will offer flowers, candles and incense. The Buddhist monks will chant *satras*. This ritual is primarily there to mark the end of a period of the year and the beginning of a new one. The villagers use this occasion to provide merit to all those who preceded them, to let the ancestors share in the results of meritorious ceremonies held by the living.

It should be noted that similar small mounds of earth covered with miniature flags may also be found at the edge of some of the private compounds of the farmers so that it seems that offerings to the ancestors may not be limited to two communal yearly occasions.

## 2) Phakey

After death the first ritual act is washing the corpse with cold water and dressing it in new clothes. There was no mention of ritual destruction of the cloth or putting the clothes on back to front. White thread is used to bind hands and feet together. After dressing the corpse has to be brought back to the place where death took place. A few small coins, the exact amount is not prescribed, can be tucked away, for example in the mouth or the armpit, and the person who prepares the corpse may say: 'This is for crossing the water.' The deceased is further covered with a shroud and put in a sturdy coffin. Above the coffin a catafalque is prepared, made of bamboo and paper, and decorated with paper banners which are called *naam* banners. These banners may be of various colours and they should not be confused with the ones hanging from the *taan khon*.

When the coffin is ready to be moved to the cemetery part of a wall has to be opened and a special ladder is made for the occasion. Whilst the body is being carried it should move feet first and, in order to ensure that no mistake is made a mark on the outside of the coffin indicates where the feet are. When the coffin has safely reached the ground it is placed upon a bamboo frame which is made up of eight pieces, two short ones supporting the 'feet' part of the coffin, another two under the 'head', two long bearers on the right side and another two long ones on the left. The ladder which had been made especially for this occasion is destroyed as soon as the coffin is placed on the frame. Friends and relatives heave the frame with its burden on their shoulders and when the funeral procession sets out they wail and cry loudly.

Among the Phakey there is no distinction between men and women in the way the coffin is placed in the grave, and there is no construction on top of the grave. Just like the Khamyang, the Phakey erect *taan khon* poles. These are huge bamboo masts, provided with one or two cross bars and from which a white banner flows. Small bamboo slats keep the banner held open and from both ends of these slats white miniature flags may flutter. There is no definite number of poles that ought to be set up, but three seems

to be a sufficient amount for an important member of the community. Sometimes there is a depiction of a bird on top of the cross bar and one informant thought the bird was a Garuda. Seven days after the death has occurred the village's ritual specialist performs a small ritual at the foot of one of the *taan khons* during which he sends the dead person's *khons* up to heaven. At the foot of the pole he may pour some turmeric water and place a few small coins and needles, whilst addressing the *khons* in a clear voice, stating that this money and these useful goods may be of good assistance during the travel to the other world. On the same day the relatives should make an offering to the Buddhist monks so that the merit will also be passed onto the *khons* before they are gone from this world.

After the ceremony of the seventh day has taken place the *taan khon* is no longer needed. It fulfils no practical purpose other than to indicate that someone has recently died. Before long the wind will rip off the white banners and the bamboo poles, rotted through at the foot, will fall over and disintegrate.

### 3) Khamti

The Khamti also wash the corpse. They do not apply turmeric to the body. When they dress the deceased the clothing is turned inside out and may be ritually destroyed by silently tearing it. Some money is placed in the coffin. When the coffin has to be carried out of the house a hole is made in a wall and it is lowered with the help of a ladder with four rungs, especially made for that occasion. Amongst all Tai peoples house ladders have an uneven number of rungs, and only the ladder for the lowering of a coffin has an even number. An even number of rungs can be used by the spirits of the dead to leave the house, and it is destroyed immediately afterwards in order to prevent them (or other wandering spirits) from entering the house. The uneven number of rungs on an ordinary ladder may be seen as a traditional protection against evil spirits.

As is the practice amongst other Assamese Tai the corpse leaves the house feet first. The coffin is covered with a cloth. The eldest son or son-in-law has to lead the procession to the cemetery and he carries a pot with embers. The grave site may not be east of the village, but any other direction may be chosen. The plot of land must first be bought with a piece of money by the son or son-in-law. The grave will be dug so that the head is turned towards the north and the feet to the south.

Upon returning to the house, a fire is made just outside the building. The people who attended the funeral sit around the fire and warm their bodies. Seven days after death the final rite of sending the *khons* away with the help of a *taan khon* takes place.

In order to compare these accounts of customs regarding death with those of other Tai groups we should present the reader with an overview of the ethnographic material available and then proceed towards an analysis. Since there is considerable detail involved this would make the chapter too lengthy and, just like the evidence on *khons*, an overview of ethnographic data and overall analysis comprise a separate chapter.

The following pages are devoted to exceptional cases. Since there is relatively little comparative material on that topic, there is no need to defer a

full discussion to a later chapter and the comparison with remarks in the literature follows immediately.

### EXCEPTIONAL CASES

#### Inauspicious death

In the short period available for fieldwork there was no opportunity to discuss with informants the details regarding the disposal of the body of people who died inauspiciously. The following paragraphs simply record a few items of information which found their way in the field notes.

If a person is detected who has committed suicide by hanging himself, the Khamyang will cut him loose and bury him that same day, preferably under the spot where the deed was performed. In general, the spirits from people who died in a violent manner are called *phu taay hoong* (spirits that died wrongly). An especially bad death is that of a pregnant woman. The place where such a dead woman is buried must be avoided, it is believed that fire may come out of the grave site. In such cases it is thought that the *khon*<sup>8</sup> has not gone to the other world and still roams about in distress, the Khamyang call it *khon waang*.

When a Phakey dies unnaturally he is also buried hurriedly on the same day. Quickly a hole may be dug in the ground, the coffin placed inside, covered with earth and a *taan khon* placed on top.

These snippets of information suffice to indicate that there are traditional ways of handling corpses of people who died inauspiciously. Though the topic is much wider, even these few items of information indicate that in this respect the Assamese Tai share in a general Tai culture. For example, the category *phu taay hoong* is known in central Thailand and also indicates generally those who died inauspiciously. The death of a pregnant woman is considered the greatest misfortune and the Nankhum Shan believe that the spirit of the dead woman becomes 'a malignant ghost, who may return to haunt her husband's home and torment him, unless precautions are taken to keep her away'.<sup>9</sup> A similar belief is common in central Thailand.<sup>10</sup> The Laotians prescribe that when a pregnant woman dies her body should not remain a single night in her house. If she dies during the night, she has to be buried that same night. She is not buried in the cemetery, but in a different place. The husband carries torn clothing and these are placed next to the corpse, together with betel and packets of rice while he asks her not to harm him and not to torment him.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the Khamyang expression *khon waang* in order to indicate a spirit which roams about in distress, it is possible that this is related to the Shan expression *phu hung phui wang*, 'a spirit supposed to cause the violent death of the person whom it enters'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In contrast with most Assamese Tai the informant, a Buddhist monk, considered that people may have but a single *khon*. Probably this view is related to the informant's training in Buddhist philosophy, especially to his notion of *vinnāna*.

<sup>9</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*

<sup>12</sup> J. N. Cushing, *A Shan and English Dictionary*, Rangoon Baptist Mission Press, 1914, p. 450.

In general, the Tai peoples seem to deal hurriedly with the remains of those who died an inauspicious or a violent death. Thus in Thailand we find the hurried organization of a funeral of the victim of a traffic accident, whilst the person who dies of old age may be kept for a long time in temporary storage whilst the family organises elaborate ceremonies. A similar hurry can be seen in the Laotian rituals for those who died inauspiciously.<sup>11</sup>

There is some evidence that the Tai disposed of some types of corpses of people who died in an inauspicious manner by quickly letting a ritual specialist send away the *khons* and then throwing the body in the river. The corpse of a baby may be placed in a pot, sealed by a man strong in magic and floated down the river. This ancient practice is shown for example in the classic Thai film *Maenakhamengrai*. It was also quite common throughout Laos before the French colonial administration took charge of the country<sup>12</sup>. Robert, who describes for the Red Tai that the ritual specialist will conduct a hurried service to lead the spirits of those who died through an accident to the other world, omits to tell us in what manner the Red Tai dispose of such corpses.<sup>13</sup>

#### Buddhist monks and cremation

Another category of dead persons amongst the Assamese Tai who are treated in a special manner are those on the other end of the scale: the people who have devoted their lives to Buddhism and who die after a lifetime in the yellow robes. The Buddhist monks of reknown will receive a most elaborate farewell and in contrast to most laypersons they are cremated. Only rarely will a lay person be cremated, and in those cases he or she would have been an exceptionally devout Buddhist. After cremation the ashes are collected and buried at the place of the cremation, in the cemetery. Just before the cremation of a very important Buddhist monk the village may stage a ritual tug-of-war, whereby long ropes are attached to the ends of the coffin and villagers pull the coffin to one side or another. It is a friendly tug-of-war, there are no 'winners' and the coffin is never pulled far from the cremation site.

According to Khamyang informants the tug-of-war may be related to an enticement of a scene from the life of the Buddha. After the Buddha had passed away to reach *parinirvana* his body was transported on a chariot. When the chariot came past the house of Anathapindika, one of the rich benefactors of the Buddhist church, the vehicle stopped and could not be moved again until Anathapindika had offered yellow robes.

Upon hearing this story, other informants agreed that the tug-of-war goes back to early Buddhism, but they produced different stories. The first of these alternative accounts relates how the venerable Ananda had been absent when the coffin was prepared and the mortal remains of the Buddha encased. When Ananda saw that the Buddha was not visible any more he knelt down in distress and asked for the Buddha's feet to emerge so he could pay respect. Hereupon the coffin broke open and the Buddha's feet became visible so that Ananda could bow down and worship. The pulling

<sup>11</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, pp. 169-81.

<sup>12</sup> Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 253, fn. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Robert, *Notes*, pp. 59-60.

of a rope on both sides of the coffin may thus be related to the opening of the Buddha's coffin. This first alternative appears to be a somewhat garbled version of a well-known event which forms part of the elaborate life-story of the Buddha. It does not concern Ananda, who had been with the Buddha when he went *parinirvana*, but Maha Kassapa, who occupied a leading position in the order of monks and who had been travelling when he heard the news of Buddha's death.

He went on to Kusinara and circumambulated the pyre three times to pay homage to the Buddha. Then he begged that as a sign that his homage was accepted, he might see the feet of his dear lord once again. At that moment the feet protruded from the end of the coffin and then withdrew.<sup>14</sup>

The second alternative account concerns two of the Buddha's early converts, Sariputta and Moggallana, and the Buddhist families who had adopted the two monks as their relatives 'in-the-faith'. The protracted quarrel between the people who had links with the monks' early childhood and those who had sustained them during their later years is re-enacted in the tug-of-war.

There are accounts of the custom of the villagers' tug-of-war over the corpse of a monk from Burma. Telford, reporting on custom in Kengtung State, has the following account:<sup>15</sup>

The Shans play and amuse themselves when contesting in a game of tug-o'-war for the corpse of one of their highly respected Buddhist priests. We have frequently seen the preparations for this ceremony. Upon a huge and cumbersome wooden cart, which is specially made for the occasion is mounted the ornate coffin of the priest. To the wooden cart, long and large home-made ropes are attached. With much laulching and shouting the hearse is hauled out to the open paddy flats and there the tug-o'-war contest takes place. The competing sides pull and tug to win the dead priest's body for to the winners is awarded the privilege of cremating the corpse.

A similar ritual is described for the Tai Yuan of northern Thailand by Keyes. He is of the opinion that it is of Shan origin.<sup>16</sup> The presumed origin in this case was also purely Buddhist. Those who pull the body to the place of burning believe that they share in the monk's great merit. The fundamental meaning of the tug-of-war is a 'symbolic answer to the question of what death means'. It refers to the idea that 'man is born to die and dies to be reborn again.'<sup>17</sup>

Sanguan Chotisukharat is of the opinion that the custom of pulling the coffin was widely used for funeral ceremonies of important secular rulers, and he refers to the Phongsawadan Yonok (The Annals of the North) of the sixteenth century where the custom was observed during the funeral rituals of the ruler of Chiangmai.<sup>18</sup>

Chotisukharat brings forth an argument which may lead to the background and origin of the strange custom of a funeral tug-of-war. The various purely Buddhist explanations brought forward by Assamese and

<sup>14</sup> Fickle, *The Life of the Buddha Murals*, opposite Plate 41. See also *The Life of the Buddha According to Thai Temple Paintings*, Bangkok: United States Information Service, 1957, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Telford, 'Animism', p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> C. F. Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for Merit.'

'Cremation of a Senior Monk', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 63, Pt. 1, 1975, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Chotisukharat, *Prapheenli Thai Phask Nua*, pp. 249-50;

Yuan informants appear to be later interpretations, they seem to be a B.C. Lins superimposition upon a local custom. It is quite possible that the ritual tug-of-war at the funeral of a Buddhist monk originates from the tendency to provide respected monks with a truly 'white' farewell and that the most elaborate funeral customs, namely those which applied to the local rulers, were held for such monks.

The tug-of-war during royal funeral ceremonies appears to be nothing more nor less than an elaboration of a general theme in the funeral 'tug' which we will describe in the next chapter in more detail, namely the aspect of 'entertaining the dead spirit'. It appears to be a general custom amongst the Tai to pull on bows which often are of a bent wood character. The tug-of-war seems to be well-known amongst various northern and eastern groups of Tai speakers. There it takes the form of a race back between men and women. It is often regarded as part of fertility cults and may be related to the spring festivals among the Tai people which often take place in caves.<sup>21</sup> Izikowitz likes to connect the tug-of-war with an enactment of the pulling of a dragon, and says that the pulling of the dragon by the women is to ensure rain and the fertility of the land.<sup>22</sup>

The ritual tug-of-war is, to our knowledge, not found amongst the southern groups of Tai, just like the ritual ball games mentioned in Chapter 5. On the other hand, the practice appears fairly widespread in southern China. Until there is found evidence of such games amongst the southern Tai groups, it is prudent to consider these practices not to be part of the Ancient Tai rituals and to regard them as borrowings from southern China some time after the first millennium A.D.

There is one more significant item of information on the cremation of Buddhist monks. The Khamyang mentioned in passing that whilst the coffin and its contents are alight the smoke is watched assiduously. If it rises up vertically and disappears high in the sky it is considered a sign that the *khom* move straight up to heaven. If, on the other hand, the smoke is deflected and blown aside there must still be links between the monk's *khoms* and this earth. If it falls straight back on the ground it will be a sign that the *khom* will roam about and may worry people for some time to come.

This practice has one clear parallel in the ethnographic literature on the Tai. In northern Thailand, during the preparation for the cremation of a senior monk, four bamboo poles are erected around the pyre and between the tops of these poles one of the late monk's robes is stretched. The 'cloth canopy' hangs about twenty metres above the place where the burning will occur.<sup>23</sup> During the ceremony the cloth is watched to see if it catches fire. If a hole is burnt — a sign that the soul of the monk has departed well.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Read, for example the description of the numerous 'pwe' organised for a Shan State funeral in Collis, *Lords of the Sunset*, pp. 182-6.

<sup>22</sup> Izikowitz, 'Notes about the Tai', p. 89 quoting L. Cadiere, *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des Vietnamiens*, Vol. II, 1954, p. 269. See also H. Roux, 'Quelques minorités ethniques du Nord-Indochine',

pp. 374-5. C. F. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>23</sup> Izikowitz, 'Notes about the Tai', p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for Merit', p. 50 and Figure 5.

<sup>25</sup> Chotisukharat, *Prapheenii Thus Phaak Naa*, pp. 247-8. See also Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for Merit', p. 53.

The parallel may be regarded as evidence of Shan influence in northern Thailand, at least regarding the belief that the smoke carries the soul of the cremated person up. It is unlikely that the custom formed part of an Ancient Tai ritual for the practice of cremation seems to have been introduced to the Tai with Buddhism. This will be discussed in the next chapter. The appearance of a canopy on four long poles must be regarded separately. Very similar constructions occur in funerals in southern Thailand<sup>24</sup> and it is possible that it goes back to some sort of scaffold. This matter is also discussed at length in the following chapter.

<sup>24</sup> Cittatham, *Khanophamnam Propheenil*, p. 90; Cf. S. Endle, *The Kacharis*, p. 48.

## TAI DEATH RITUALS IN WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Following the pattern set in previous chapters we commence with a survey of the ethnographic materials, beginning with the westernmost Tai groups and ending with those living in southeastern China. The second part of the chapter consists of an analysis of the material, an assessment as to which aspects are likely to have been part of the Archaic Tai culture and an evaluation of the place and importance of the Assamese Tai material presented in Chapter 6.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL SURVEY REGARDING THE EXPECTED DEMISE<sup>1</sup>

#### Ahom

There is very little known about the burial customs of the Ahom at the time they conquered Assam. From the time that detailed records were available Hinduism appears to have occupied a major position, at least in the royal burials for which most information exists. Originally, the Ahom followed the practice of burying the corpse and up to the middle of the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup> even kings were buried. The dead bodies of poor people were buried in the ground without coffins, while those of the rich were laid in boxes. A waterpot, a cup, a hat and a wooden stool were put inside the coffin with the corpse. These articles were intended for the use of the deceased's spirit in the next world.<sup>3</sup>

In the latter half of the seventeenth century Talish gives a short account of Ahom burial customs. The relevant paragraph may be translated as follows:<sup>4</sup>

The (non-Muslim) peasants bury their dead along with a piece of his legacy, laying the body with the head towards the East and the feet towards the West. The rulers build mausoleums for their own glorification, and bury in it the women and servants of the deceased after killing them, together with a few years' necessaries like elephants' gold and silver utensils, bedding, dress and eatables. For utmost security they roof it over with heavy beams of timber and leave therein a lamp-stand with plenty of oil and place there a living man as lampighter so that

<sup>1</sup> Much of the material presented in this chapter was presented in a different context as evidence in my study of Tai funeral customs, made before the period of fieldwork in Assam commenced and which appeared in *Anthropos* under the title 'Tai Funeral Customs, Towards a Reconstruction of Archaic-Tai Ceremonies'. On occasions where I diverge from the *Anthropos* article this will be mentioned in a footnote or in

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<sup>2</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 263-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264, citing Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.

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he can remain busy with lighting (the lamps). From the ten tombs that were opened nearly 90 thousand rupees in all kinds of goods were obtained.

Among the curiosities one is this: In the tombs (mausoleums) of one of the women of a Raja of that kingdom who was buried about 80 years before, a golden *pan-dan* was discovered in which there was a green betel leaf. Although the present writer had not seen the betel leaves, yet he heard this in the company of the Nawab from the lips of Paenda Beg, the authorised waquia Navis, and Shah Beg, both of whom had been detailed to the work of plundering the tombs...

Another account of the contents of an Ahom noble's tomb comes from Clayton.<sup>1</sup> It concerns a mausoleum erected probably not long after the reign of Gaurinath Singha (1780-95). The tomb was built on ground level and was covered with a huge mound. In the burial room the coffin was positioned in an east-west direction. Personal ornaments, such as rings, toothpick case and ear ornaments were placed in a spot about the middle of the coffin, 'as if placed under or near where the hand might have been'. A golden lime-container for those who chew betel nut was also found at the coffin. On the platform upon which the coffin rested were eating, drinking and cooking vessels and some iron adz's. From another, similar tomb, many jars and boxes containing clothing, books, eating and cooking vessels as well as miniature weapons were found. A stand that had been used for preserving the shape of the turban or headdress deserves special mention.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these tombs can still be found, overgrown with shrubs and weeds, especially at Charaideu where a gigantic cemetery for Ahom nobles can be found, but also at various other places in upper Assam. At Charaideu it is apparent that on some of the gigantic tombs there must have been a small but sturdy building on top, the remains of which still put out and provide vantage points for tourists to clamber up and enjoy the view. Unfortunately no strict measures have been taken to protect these grave sites from the crowds of holiday makers, let alone measures to preserve, excavate or reconstruct them.

From these accounts it is clear that Ahom people indeed buried their dead, that the corpse was laid out with the head towards the east and that a variety of goods were given to the wealthy. The Ahom, undoubtedly under Hindu influence, now often cremate their dead, but it has been noted that they differ from other Hindusised peoples in the region in that they bury dead children and infants up to the age of about ten, whilst surrounding Hindus cremate all their dead, including children.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient Ahom funeral ritual there seems to be some importance attached to keeping a lamp burning in the grave of an Ahom king and there is evidence of animal and human sacrifice as part of the elaborate funeral customs. The inclusion of elephants in Talish's account may seem rather fanciful on first sight. Yet we will notice later in this chapter how one or more elephants form part of the cortege amongst the Shan and the Yuan. Clayton, discussing the

<sup>1</sup> C. Clayton, 'Description of the Tomb of an Ahom Noble', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. 17, 1848, pp. 473-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 473.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>4</sup> R. C. Murhead-Thomson, *Assam Valley, Beliefs and Customs of the Assamese Hindus*, London: Luzac, 1948, p. 70.

tombs of early Ahom kings with a knowledgeable Ahom informant has no difficulty believing in a sacrificial elephant and he leaves a space of ten by five feet in his sketch of the largest tomb for the slaughtered animal.<sup>11</sup> The custom of sacrificing people and animals is reputed to have stopped in the reign of Rudra Singa (1696-1714).

To this historical account can be added some ethnographic material regarding the most traditional Ahom burial customs which can still be observed amongst the 'priestly classes'. After an elderly person has died the body is taken out of the house. Whilst the threshold is crossed an egg may be broken by striking it against the fire-lead of the deceased.<sup>12</sup> The corpse is washed, dressed in garments of good quality, anointed with pulse and turmeric paste, laid out on a bamboo mat in a corner of the compound and covered with a new piece of white cotton. With the help of paddy straw three packets can be made, one having three grains of rice, the second five and the last one seven grains. These are carried on a winnowing basket to the corpse and the deceased's hand is taken and rubbed over the packets whilst imploring him not to take the goddess of wealth away, but to leave the house in prosperity. If the deceased is a woman, cotton seeds can be used instead of rice. These packets are taken back to the house and three days later they will be opened for a careful inspection. If the number of seeds has decreased it is a sign that the deceased has taken at least some wealth and that bad times lay ahead, if the number is the same no change can be expected and if the number is greater prosperity is likely to follow.<sup>13</sup> One of the sons of the deceased may take a portion from the centre of the kitchen hearth and, mixing this with earth, make a new oven in the courtyard. A new pot which has been broken somewhat is used to cook rice and chicken and a small quantity of the food is placed in the mouth of the dead person.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile the grave is dug in the village burial ground<sup>15</sup> after having offered some coins to the earth. The grave is dug in such a way that the head end points to a northeasterly direction. The grave is swept several times with a leafy branch from the mango tree which has been drenched in water. This coffin may be made on the spot in the grave, but other accounts mention the possibility of a coffin made in the courtyard. The corpse is carried off a bier in procession to the graveyard, whilst akinsan leads the way with a flag, a bundle of straw in his hand and screeds from a cloth or threads are thrown aside from time to time during the procession. Women and children do not take part in the cortège.<sup>16</sup>

At the grave site an interesting ritual takes place. An egg is tied in one corner of a towel and lowered down to touch the bottom of the grave by

<sup>11</sup> Clayton, 'Description of the Tomb', pp. 475-6.

<sup>12</sup> The two sources which provided the basis for the following section are Padmeshwar Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, Chapter IX and Indira Barua, 'Mortuary Rites among the Mohans and Deodhais' *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University*, Volume II, 1973, pp. 22-6.

<sup>13</sup> P. Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, p. 89 and I. Barua, 'Mortuary Rites', p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>15</sup> I. Barua, 'Mortuary Rites', pp. 23-4.

<sup>16</sup> I. Barua, *Social Relations in an Ahom Village*, p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> I. Barua, 'Mortuary Rites', p. 24.

the priest, who calls for the soul of a participant to not dwell in that place which is reserved for the deceased. As he lifts the egg from the grave the priest makes a suction sound. For each participant the ritual act is held three times. Finally the priest drops the egg into the open grave. If it breaks it is interpreted to mean that the deceased had lived his life to the full, but if the egg remains intact the death was premature.

The dead person is carried around the grave three, five, or seven times, whilst the torchbearer points to the corners of the grave, taking care not to look into the open hole. Then the deceased is lowered into his final resting place, face upward and his head towards the northeast. Articles which may have been taken from the house can be buried with him. A layer of split bamboo is placed over the coffin, a final announcement is made to the deceased to inform him that he has reached his home and that he should not disturb the living. Then the grave is filled up and more earth is collected from the surroundings so as to create a mound, some five feet in height or more.

On top of this mound a small shade may be constructed, covered with a piece of half-woven cloth.<sup>16</sup> Gogoi mentions how on top of the mound a perforated cup may be placed, a knife by its side and that a meal containing meat can be placed at the top of the mound. These offerings are covered with the leafy branches of trees so that birds or other animals will not upset them.<sup>17</sup> A banana tree might be planted at the foot of the grave and the whole mound is then encircled by a rough fence made of split bamboo. Some of the implements used to make the grave may be ritually destroyed and placed near the mound, and also the earthen pot which had been used to moisten the mango leaves is broken and left there. On the way home the participants of the burial party must take a bath and wash all their clothing. Also they must light a straw fire and warm hands and feet. One report mentions that each person has to cross the fire before entering home.<sup>18</sup>

The members of the deceased's clan must mourn and abstain from cooking for three days until a ritual purification has taken place, but close family members continue their mourning until the ritual of sending the soul of the deceased to the world of the ancestors has taken place. During this ceremony offerings are made to the ancestors and some food is placed on the burial mound under a small shed constructed for that purpose. In this burial house a low seat and a hand fan may also be kept.<sup>19</sup>

An interesting parallel between Ahom and Khamti burial methods may be drawn from an early nineteenth century account of graves near a Khamti town in the upper Irrawaddy valley. Wilcox describes a tomb of a great man, built of clay, whitened over, with a vase-shaped gilt top and surrounded with many tall poles, ornamented, having long flowing silken pendants. Naturally we cannot infer from such a casual observation that these mounds were actual tombs. We might have to do with Buddhist stupas. However, the bamboo poles with pendants can easily be recognised as *taan khons* and thus we have evidence of the fact that the use of these poles goes back a considerable time.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> P. Gogoi, *Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs*, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Wilcox, 'Memoir', p. 70.

## Shan

At the end of the sixteenth century, Ralph Fitch visited Zimme in the Shan States and describes the funeral palanquin, cremation, gathering of bones and burial:<sup>20</sup>

And if any dies he is carried upon a great frame made like a tower, with a covering all gilded with golde made of canes carried with fourteen or sixteen men, with drummes and pipes and other instrumentals playing before him to a place out of the towne and there is burned. He is accompanied with all his friends and ne ghborers, al men and they give to the tallipoies or priests many mats and cloth: and then they returne to the house and there make a feast for two dayes: and then the wife with all the neighbours wiues and her friends go to the place where he was burned, and there they sit a certaine time add [sic] cry and gather the pieces of bones which be left unburned and bury them, and then returne to their houses and make an end of all mourning.

There exists a nineteenth century description of Shan funeral customs:<sup>21</sup> When anyone dies, the women of the house wail and beat their breasts, in token of their grief, in a similar way to that in vogue amongst the lower class in Ireland and Burmah; the coronach is joined by their friends, and often every dog in the place. There are generally fewer funeral ceremonies than in Burmah: this much depends, however, upon the wealth of the family. Cremation, on a pyre of scented wood, is the rule, burying the exception: but in all cases of sudden death, contagious diseases, or bowel complaints, the body must be buried...

Chaos and officials of rank are, strange to say, generally buried. Previous to the interment the body is embalmed and kept above ground for several months, during which period the friends and relations are entertained with Shan pwais (or plays), wrestling matches, dances, gambling parties, and other diversions more festive than funeral in their nature. The face of the dead chao is invariably covered with a mask of gold or silver...

Much more interesting detail can be gleaned from Milne's account of the Namkham Shan.<sup>22</sup> A corpse is first washed with water (sometimes scented water is used), and preferably the dead are dressed in new clothes, which are torn slightly. In olden times the upper garment was put on back-to-front. If a garment had a burn mark it should on no account be used to dress a corpse, for this would cause suffering to the spirit of the dead. Thumbs and toes are tied together and an object is placed on the tongue, as passage money, for the boatman who ferries souls across the river of death. General this is a small coin of silver or copper, but in the case of a wealthy man gems or gold and silver may be used. A Shan chief will have his face gilded with pure lead, gold before he is laid in the coffin. The coffin is an oblong wooden case decorated with brightly coloured paper which is cut into geometrical patterns.

During the wake the corpse is dressed in white. When it concerns the funeral of an important community member there is less wailing, people wear their brightest garments and partake in extensive meals. The only sign of mourning consists of women wailing at the pyre of the deceased's

<sup>20</sup> J. Horton Ryley, *Ralph Fitch, England's Pilgrim to India and Burma*, London: Fisher Unwin, 1899, 172.

<sup>21</sup> A. R. Colquhoun, *Amongst the Shaws*,

New York: Paragon Reprint, 1970, pp. 289-90

<sup>22</sup> Milne, *Shans at Home*, pp. 89-97.

good deeds. To such a funeral the Shan bring a multitude of presents, such as umbrellas, brooms, waterbottles, mats, pillows, bedquilts and betel boxes. These are displayed around the coffin during the wake and when the procession to the cemetery takes place they are carried on long poles to the grave. The gifts are afterwards presented to the monastery in name of the dead. Some food, tea, or tobacco may be placed in the grave. Sometimes a horse is led in the funeral procession and afterwards donated to the monastery. During state funerals there may be humorous plays.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding the removal of the coffin, Milne reports that the coffin is carried through the door via the verandah down the stairs. Only in the case of a woman who has died in childbirth will a special opening be made in the wall of the house in order to lower the coffin.<sup>24</sup> The procession is led by women carrying the presents on long poles; they are followed by monks who guide the coffin by way of a long strip of cotton cloth which is connected to the bier. The bier and the coffin, which has a huge canopy on top are carried by men. Close female relatives walk immediately behind, touching the bier with their hands. At the end of the cortege walk the men who are not closely related to the deceased.

The Shan may beat drums, gongs and cymbals or fire guns to scare away evil spirits. The grave is carefully swept with brambles or thorns to expel any evil spirits.<sup>25</sup> Though Colquhoun, cited above, mentions that the Shan generally cremate their dead, this is denied by the evidence of Scott and Milne, who state that burial is the norm.<sup>26</sup> Probably Colquhoun was more familiar with regions where Buddhism had left a deeper impact. When the coffin has been lowered into the grave a rope, which has been placed with one end in the grave, is pulled out with a jerk in a northern direction in order to help the spirit of the dead person begin his journey to Mount Meru. Sometimes food, such as rice, tea and tobacco is placed in the grave, which is filled up with earth and the big canopy is placed on top. This canopy remains there until insects complete the destruction.<sup>27</sup>

To commemorate the dead, Shan have a yearly festival during which they raise tall bamboo masts to which long streamers are attached. These streamers can be of plain cloth others are ornamented with geometrical designs cut out of gold paper. Some are in the shape of a long, narrow cylinder. Sometimes the streamers are embroidered with elaborate designs, pagodas, birds or a boat in which a passenger is being rowed across a river. When the poles are raised for the dead, a basket with rice and fruit is attached to each pole, the people give a shout and hundreds of birds that have been waiting, fly to the baskets to eat the grain.<sup>28</sup>

### Lue

The Lue ritually wash and then dress in new clothes the recently deceased persons,<sup>29</sup> both hands and toes being tied together with white thread. Flowers and candles, as well as a piece of wax, moulded in the

<sup>23</sup> Collis, *Lords of the Sunset*, pp. 182-6. <sup>25</sup> p. 95

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92 and p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, Pt. I, Vol. 1, pp. 325-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325, Milne, *Shans at Home*,

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-4 and the illustration opposite p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Le May, *An Asian Arcady*, p. 191.

shape of a boat are placed in the hands.<sup>20</sup> The corpse is laid out in a coffin in the home, but with little ritual other than some chanting on the part of monks on the day of the burial. The Yunnan Lue reportedly at one time conducted a family sacrifice ceremony at home where the corpse lay in state, apparently an occasion for eating, drinking and dancing, i.e. 'entertaining the corpse'.<sup>21</sup>

The place for burial or cremation is determined by placing an egg and some other eatables in a bag and flinging the bag away haphazardly. Wherever the bag falls and the egg breaks there is the spot for burial or cremation. If the egg does not break, the bag is thrown again until the egg is broken.<sup>22</sup> Amongst the Lue who have been in Thailand cremation is the norm, only those who die excessively are buried. Le May mentions both burial and cremation, and Chotisukharat on the northern groups, finds burial the normal way of disposing of the body.<sup>23</sup>

### Yuan

An early account of a Yuan state funeral mentions that the body of a dead prince was covered with gold leaf. The funeral procession contained people marching to a slow and wailing funeral dirge and the solemn beat of drums. Behind the coffin the vacant throne with the royal crown was carried, then came the dead prince's horse and his riding elephant, followed by family members and friends. For a duration of more than a year the coffin was placed at a temporary resting place, with a lamp burning day and night at its head and foot.<sup>24</sup>

When a Yuan dies his corpse is first washed with cold, previously boiled water. Chotisukharat mentions an old manuscript according to which a coin ought to be placed in the deceased's mouth.<sup>25</sup> New clothing is put on, but the coat is reversed so that the buttons face inwards. The face is powdered and neck, wrists and ankles are tied with a white cotton thread. Whilst the corpse is laid out a candle should be alight near the head. A thread is strung just above the corpse and a cloth draped over this thread. The wake is a good opportunity for Yuan youth to meet and get to know members of the opposite sex. There are signs of a ritual 'entertaining the corpse' in the *hakao* (a preaching service) described for an important funeral by Keyes.<sup>26</sup>

In order to prevent evil spirits from entering the house during these days, a folded bamboo mat or cane may be put up at the doorway. It is called a *talok*. There is no account of specific ritual ways of removing the coffin from the house except from the *hakao*, if a water pot may be smashed at that time. The coffin is borne by men carrying pennants and one holding a pot of embers, followed by women who hold a cotton

<sup>20</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> Lebar et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, citing Chiang, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', pp. 167-8.

<sup>23</sup> M. Moerman, fieldnotes and personal communication, reported by Lebar, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Lebar, loc. cit.

<sup>26</sup> D. McGilvary, *A Half Century among the Siamese and the Lao*, New York: Revell, 1912, pp. 136-7.

<sup>27</sup> Chotisukharat, *Prapheenii Thai Phaak Nua*, p. 235.

<sup>28</sup> Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for Merit', pp. 53-4.

<sup>29</sup> Le May, 'The Lü', p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> Chotisukharat, *Prapheenii Thai Phaak Nua*, p. 229.

thread connecting them to the deceased. Cremation is the norm amongst the Yuan. The Yuan know the custom of making a house-like construction which they place on top of the coffin and carry along in the funeral procession. This 'house' is cremated with the corpse. There is also a huge construction on top of the coffin during the cremation of a senior monk.<sup>41</sup>

### **Thai (Central Thailand)**

The earliest remark regarding Thai funeral customs is that of Wang Ta-yuan, whose description was written in 1149. He states, 'When a person dies they pour quicksilver into the body to nourish it'.<sup>42</sup> Probably this refers to a custom connected with state funerals. At the beginning of the fifteenth century Ma Huan gives us more details:<sup>43</sup>

... whenever a man of wealth and standing dies, they take quicksilver and pour it inside the abdomen (of the corpse) and bury it; when one of the poorer class dies, they carry the corpse to the wilds by the sea-side, and place it on the edge of the sand, subsequently golden-coloured birds as large as geese — more than thirty, or fifty, of them — gather in flight in the sky; they descend, take the flesh of the corpse, devour it completely, and fly away (viii) the people of the (dead man's) family weep over the bones which remain, then cast them away in the water and return home. They call this 'bird-burial'. They also invite a Buddhist priest to celebrate a mass, chant liturgies, and worship Buddha, and that is all.

Even when taking into account that Ma Huan tends to report only the more picturesque and curious customs in favour of those which would cause little amazement to his audience, he provides us with a corroboration of the use of mercury for the burial of the wealthy. As to the 'bird-burial', there are aspects in Tai funeral practices which may indeed be related to a custom of giving a corpse to the vultures. This topic will be discussed in more detail in the later part of this chapter.

Just like Wang-Ta-yuan, Fei Hsin appears to note only the burial of the wealthy when he remarks that as soon as a person has drawn his last breath they pour quicksilver in the corpse to preserve it, and later on they choose a high mound of earth, where, after a religious ceremony, they bury it.<sup>44</sup> The burial mound corresponds with the funeral customs of Ahom nobles described above.

Early in the seventeenth century Joost Schouten reported on beliefs and customs regarding the disposal of the dead:<sup>45</sup>

... the dead, who being first superstitiously shaven, anointed, charmed, and with much ceremony, as weeping, cutting the hair of the head by the next friend, alms, prayers of the Priests, musick, plays, fireworks, and other shows (according to the quality and ability of the deceased), burnt with fire, their collected ashes are afterwards anointed and buried near the Temples, a Pyramid rich and magnificent being erected over them; so that these funerals are extremely expensive to the survivors, as well as honorable for the deceased.

<sup>41</sup> Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for Merit', Figures 2-7.

<sup>42</sup> Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations', p. 100.

<sup>43</sup> J. V. G. Mills, *Ma Huan, Ying-yai Sheng-lan 'The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores'*, Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1970, p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations', p. 104.

<sup>45</sup> F. Caron and J. Schouten, *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan & Siam*, London: The Argonaut Press 1935, p. 105.

This account deals apparently with the funeral of the wealthy and it demonstrates that cremation had already become widespread. Parts of the ritual appear to be a ritual washing, wailing as well as 'entertaining the corpse'. To our knowledge, Schouten's account is the first in which the use of a *Thai burial pagoda*, or *ceedii* is mentioned.

Later during the same century Gervaise reports some of the funeral customs.<sup>46</sup> At the moment of death of a wealthy person, a brass drum is beaten. The corpse is washed and quicksilver is poured down the throat. Pieces of copper, gold or silver are placed on the mouth, eyes and ears and later these are made into rings which are kept by relatives. For three nights the priests chant, whilst the corpse lies fully dressed on a mat in its coffin. The funeral procession may be in boats, first the priest, then the coffin and then the laypersons. At the cremation ground the corpse is placed on a high platform beneath a gilded pyramid. The pyre is decorated with 'trappings similar to those we generally see in our theatres' complete with pots of fireworks. Whilst the pyre burns female relatives and masked dancers dance continually around and assume 'a thousand horrible postures'. The ashes are placed under a pyramidal structure in the monastery. Gervaise mentions that formerly precious stones and money were also placed under the pyramid in order to supply the needs in the other world. Children are buried in a field, thrown overnight into the river or else exposed to be food for the birds.<sup>47</sup>

De la Loubière, who visited Siam in 1687 and 1688 provides many other details.<sup>48</sup> Immediately after death a wealthy man is placed in a wooden coffin which is varnished and gilded on the outside. In order to combat decomposition mercury is poured in the mouth. Whilst the coffin remains at home, incense and candles are burnt. The place of cremation is chosen by the family, usually a spot near a monastery. This place is enclosed with a square bamboo fence and contains replicas of houses, movables, domestic and savage animals cut out of paper. In the middle of this enclosure the pyre is built. 'The greatest honour of the Funeral consists in erecting the Pile, not in eagerly heaping up Wood, but in great Scaffolds, on which they do put Earth and then Wood'.<sup>49</sup> The cortège consists of the coffin, carried by parents and friends, the family, men and women, all dressed in white and 'lamenting exceedingly', followed by the rest of the friends and relations. The body is taken out of the coffin before it is burnt, and before the pyre is lighted, various entertaining theatrical and musical shows can be provided. After cremation the ashes and charred bones are placed in the coffin which is put then under a pyramidal construction (*ceedii*). Sometimes precious stones and other valuables can be buried with these ashes.

The poor, according to De la Loubière, inter their corpses without cremation. If they lack even the money to have monks chant over a burial rite, they do think honor enough to their dead Parent, to expose them in the field on an eminent place; that is to say on a Scaffold where the Vultures and the Crows devour them.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> N. Gervaise, *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam, A.D. 1688*, translated into English from the original by H. S. O'Neill, Bangkok: 1928, p. 92-3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>48</sup> De la Loubière *The Kingdom of Siam*, pp. 123-5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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<sup>48</sup> De la Loubière, *The Kingdom of Siam*, pp. 123-5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Thus, at the later half of the seventeenth century three types of disposal of the body may be recognised in Siam. The rich cremate and bury the remains under a Buddhist pyramid, the poor bury their dead without cremation and the destitute place corpses on platforms to let the birds devour the flesh. Some of the details provided by De la Loubère deserve special attention, such as the construction of the pyre, whereby a scaffold is covered with earth and upon which a heap of fuel is placed, which may or may not be related to the Ahom tomb descriptions. The paper implements and animals around the pyre could be a southern Tai variant of supplying a wealthy man with a multitude of useful objects and beasts in the world hereafter. De la Loubère notes that these objects are not burnt, but are taken to the monastery and can be used again for other funerals.

'Bird burial' is also mentioned in Crawfurd's *Journal*, which dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

Charity to the lower animals is considered by the Siamese a religious virtue of great merit, and this frequently gives rise at funerals to a disgusting and abominable rite, never performed, however, except in compliance with the dying request of the deceased. It consists in cutting slices of flesh from the corpse, and with these feeding the birds of prey and dogs, which are seen in numbers about the temples, waiting for this horrid feast. After this ugly rite, the remains of the body are buried in the usual manner.

There are photographs of the late nineteenth century Wat Saket in Bangkok, where corpses of prisoners or the poor were left to be devoured by vultures and dogs.<sup>52</sup> A similar illustration is given by Draws-Tychsen.<sup>53</sup> It is thus clear that various forms of 'bird burial' have been reported for Siam for a period of some five centuries. A similar length of time may be assigned to the custom of embalming the bodies of the rich with the help of mercury. It was noted in the fourteenth century by a Chinese traveller, and we find it still in the ethnographic literature of the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup>

More detail can be found in twentieth century accounts. Phya Anuman Rajadhon has written a lengthy study of Thai funerals<sup>55</sup> and from this we learn that the corpse is washed in water which has been boiled in an earthenware pot, to which *somp wi*,<sup>56</sup> tamarind leaves, or *sommakrut*<sup>57</sup> is added. A coin may be inserted in the deceased's mouth as fare for entering the other world. A rich person could have his face covered with a golden mask, and in olden times ordinary people used a mask made of beeswax. The corpse has a white cotton thread bound around neck, wrists and ankles.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> J. Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochinchina*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 321.

p. 45.

<sup>52</sup> Rajadhon, *Prapheenii Kao Khoong Thai*, pp. 345-644.

<sup>53</sup> L. Dekeyser, *Notes de voyage, Japon, Iles Hawaii, Chine, Siam*, Bruxelles: Imprimerie medicale et scientifique L. Severeys, 1908, pp. 127-9.

<sup>54</sup> Acacia concinna. Mcfarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, p. 815, mentions that the pods are sold everywhere in India and are used chiefly for washing the hair.

<sup>55</sup> H. Draws-Tychsen, *Khun S'ra Prasöt Slamsange*, Leiden: Brill, 1955, opposite, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Citrus hystrix. The chief use of the fruit of this tree is for washing the hair and other parts of the body (*Ibid.*, p. 815).

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Dekeyser, *Notes de voyage*, and R. Plion-Bernier, *Festivals and Ceremonies of Thailand* (translated by E. Soulier), Bangkok: Assumption Press, 1973,

<sup>58</sup> Rajadhon, *Prapheenii Kao Khoong Thai*, pp. 441-50; Kingko Attagara, *The Folk Religion of Ban Nat, A Hamlet in Central Thailand*, Bangkok: Kurusupha Press, 1967, p. 114; Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 257.

In case of a violent death, an extra strong binding may be deemed necessary. The deceased is then dressed in clean, neat clothes. A button may be removed from the shirt. An old custom was to dress the corpse twice, first back-to-front, then in an ordinary fashion. In Ban Nai garments are turned inside out.<sup>59</sup> A lamp must be kept alight all the time that a corpse is in the house<sup>60</sup> and the lamp may be carried with the body to the cremation ground.<sup>61</sup> Whilst the corpse lays at home in the coffin it is customary to present it with food at meal times. If the deceased liked to chew betel, some areca nut wrapped in a betel leaf which has been smeared with lime is prepared in the manner the dead person liked and this is inserted in the mouth.

According to Phya Anuman the coffin may well traditionally have been in the shape of a dug-out canoe and the old-fashioned coffin still shows signs of that origin in its shape (wider at the opening than at the bottom) and in the ritual of 'opening' the coffin.<sup>62</sup> Nowadays a coffin is not made of a hollowed-out trunk, but it is an oblong made of planks. Regarding the direction of the coffin whilst it stands at home there are conflicting reports. Most authors seem to agree with Rajadhon and direct the head of the coffin towards the west, but Attagara found that in Ban Nai it should be towards the south.<sup>63</sup> In the coffin three banana leaves may be placed under the body. There is ample entertainment at the largest funerals in the form of films and shows, but there is some evidence of more licentious behaviour when a Buddhist monk in Ratburi province mentioned that long ago monks could drink alcohol during funerals and dance. Such behaviour would be unthinkable nowadays. Ritual wailing also forms part of the traditional funeral customs of the Thai.

When the coffin has to leave the house, traditionally the Thai open the side wall of the room in which the corpse lies in state in order to lower the coffin to the ground. If the coffin is moved via the ordinary door and stairway, these can be provided with branches, allegedly to prevent the dead person's spirit from recognising the way. In addition it is customary to break one or more waterpots at this moment, or empty all the water containers.

During the most traditional farmer's funeral witnessed by the author, the procession was led by Buddhist monks holding a cotton thread, with some close male relatives also holding on to the thread which was connected to the coffin. Besides the thread, just behind the men, walked close female relatives carrying a tray with incense, flowers and a candle. The coffin was suspended from two bamboo bearers and carried by four men. A group of female relatives followed the coffin, then came the village's ritual specialist carrying a tray with goods for the deceased and at some distance a group of friends closed the procession. In his description of ancient funeral customs, Rajadhon mentions that a pot with embers is carried in the cortege.<sup>64</sup> Just before the cremation, one or more trays with useful goods may be dropped from a small height in a gesture of destruction and these

<sup>59</sup> Attagara, *The Folk Religion*, p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> Rajadhon, *Prapheenil Kao Khoong Thai*, pp. 450-62.

<sup>61</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, p. 258; Princess Poon Pismai Diskul, *Thai Traditions and Customs*, Bangkok WEB, 1969, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> Attagara, *The Folk Religion*, p. 114.

<sup>63</sup> Attagar, *The Folk Religion*, p. 114.

<sup>64</sup> Rajadhon, *Prapheenil Kao Khoong Thai*, pp. 556-8.

— is afterwards revert to the monastery. Goods which are suitable for a deceased's funeral are a lamp, fuel, matches, a knife, some medicine, seed rice, onions, garlic and some tools to work the soil. A piece of paper, entitling the bearer to a plot of land in the other world may be added. The normal way of disposing of the bodies is by cremation, but in some cases of a very inauspicious death or in the case of children burial is possible. An interesting custom, reported for Ratburi province is that before the corpse is placed in the coffin, thorny plants may be waved through the coffin. This may well be a survival of the custom of waving thorny plants through the grave, reported for the Tais who practise burial.

After cremation the bits of bone which remain may be arranged in the shape of a body and relatives may sprinkle these bones with perfumed water. First the bones are arranged so that the 'body' is directed towards the west, then they are re arranged so that it points to the east.<sup>65</sup> A second ritual washing also takes place in Ban Nat, but there it is timed just before cremation when the undertaker pours some coconut juice over the body's face.<sup>66</sup> There is no sign of a mortuary house in central Thailand, but indirectly the pyramidal remembrance edifice erected over the charred bones and ash may be related to that custom.

### **The Tai of southern Thailand**

In southern Thailand a corpse is first washed with water in which various medicinal leaves have been placed, and then dressed in its best clothes, but the clothing is reversed, so that the shirt buttons are fastened at the back and the knot of the loin-cloth also should be at the back. The hair may be combed back to front. The face is powdered and a coin or a ring is placed in the mouth. The corpse is laid in a coffin and in the hands flowers, incense and a candle are placed so that the deceased will be able to present these ritual objects to Thaateuculaamani in heaven. Three cotton threads are bound around the body, one at the feet, one at the middle and one around the neck.<sup>67</sup>

The Tai of southern Thailand can recall that in the past they had a custom of wrapping the corpse in bamboo and stringing it up high in a tree. The remains were left there until only the skeleton was left. This then could be taken down for cremation. Another method of leaving the corpse would be to half bury the coffin in the earth. According to Cittatham the tree-burial represents an ancient Tai burial custom. It is related to the local words for cemetery 'prew', or in northern Thailand, to the word 'paahew', which refers to a section of the forest which is reserved for bad things such as corpses in trees.<sup>68</sup>

At present corpses are cremated and at the ceremony for an important person, a high canopy is erected on four poles above the pyre and around the place of cremation a low bamboo fence is made.<sup>69</sup> When the fire has been lighted and the flames rise high, people can take a piece of cloth and throw it three times through the smoke. This cloth is later taken back

<sup>65</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, pp. 261-2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87-8.

<sup>67</sup> Attagara, *The Folk Religion*, p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90, see also the last illustration

<sup>69</sup> Cittatham, *Khanopphanim Prapheenii*, in the book, pp. 83-6.

and amulets can be made out of it. Early in the morning of the following day some remnants of bones are washed and ashes collected. They are placed on the ground in the shape of a person, directed with the head towards the west. A monk chants some solemn words and the bones are re-arranged so that the head turns to the east.

### The Tai of northeast Thailand

Before washing the corpse, water must first be boiled with *sompoon* or with tamarind leaves. Cold water is added until the mixture is lukewarm and can be used for a thorough washing.<sup>70</sup> It is also customary to insert a coin in the deceased's mouth.

I am not sure why this is so, but I think if he does not have the Satang he might lose his way, never finding the house or the land of the spirits.<sup>71</sup>

The body is sometimes rubbed with white clay powder and dressed, whereby trousers and shirt may be put on back-to-front and a small tear, about an inch in length can be made in each. The big toes, knees, thumbs, elbows and neck may be tied with white cotton thread. One report mentions that the eyes and mouth are closed with wax.<sup>72</sup> Another account of Northern Thai funerals mentions that a cloth is placed over the head.<sup>73</sup> Whilst the corpse lies at home, the head is directed towards the west. A string is tied between two poles so that it can support a red (sometimes white) cloth like a 'tent' over the body, and a decorated piece of silk may be thrown over the head end of this 'tent' by way of decoration. The casket may be x-shaped, that is, two oblongs tapering ends meeting, decorated with geometric patterns and flowers. The upper part of the casket may be separated from the lower part by a grill made of lashed bamboo on which the corpse, wrapped in a blanket is laid on a mattress. A bamboo canopy may be placed on top of the casket and draped with the red cloth which originally had been used as 'tent'.<sup>74</sup>

During the wake there are some ritual games and one of these, specifically reserved for such occasions, involved a team of boys and one of girls who play a guessing game and forfeit something valuable when a guess was wrong.<sup>75</sup> As the coffin is carried out of the house (feet first) water containers are emptied and turned upside down.<sup>76</sup> Ritual wailing may occur at this moment. The most traditional funeral procession consists of the village undertaker, carrying a tray with a raw egg, eight candles, flowers and a coin, followed by members of the Sangha holding a cotton thread which is tied to the thick rope attached to a cart carrying the coffin. Men pull along both sides of the rope and men walk beside the cart to prevent the coffin and

<sup>70</sup> Rajadhon, *Prapheenil Kao Khoong Thai*, p. 412.

1970, p. 180.

<sup>71</sup> R. Kickert, 'A Funeral in Yang Tern, Changwat Ubol, Northeast Thailand', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 48, Pt. 2, 1960, p. 73.

<sup>72</sup> Kickert, 'A Funeral in Yang Tern', p. 75. According to Archaimbault, this cloth is often used in Thailand instead of beeswax (*Structures religieuses lao*, p. 183).

<sup>73</sup> S. J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology, no. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

<sup>74</sup> Kickert, 'A Funeral in Yang Tern', p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-8.

<sup>76</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, p. 182. Kickert does not mention this detail.

canopy from sliding off. Older women, carrying water, a mat and some food follow in the rear.

The ritual specialist finds the right spot for burial by throwing an egg; where the egg breaks there the cremation takes place. Coconut milk and scented water is poured over the corpse. The red silken cloth is thrown three times over the pyre, and later given to the priests. Four stakes are placed around the pyre and the flags which decorate the canopy are put at these four corners as well as the eight candles. During the cremation the men play a game of hitting a coconut. The remaining bones are collected in a pot and buried at the cremation place. The excavated earth is moulded in the shape of a man's body with his head towards the east and the pot is buried at the place where his 'chest' should be. The bones are washed, the dirt figure broken up and used to form a mound over the pot. Later in the monastery grounds some food is presented to the spirit of the deceased and a small flag is placed there where the spirit is fed. That is the moment the spirit is considered to leave.<sup>77</sup>

### Lao

After death the body is washed. According to Archaimbault this is done with lukewarm water which contains *somp*, whilst Zago mentions scented water, first hot, then cold.<sup>78</sup> Clothing is put on in reverse and front-to-back, and a button is torn off or a small tear is made in the material. The body is turned with the head to the west and the neck, the hands and the feet are tied. A coin may be placed in the mouth, and if the deceased was fond of chewing betel, some areca nut and betel leaf is also put there. The eyes and mouth may be sealed with honey and a wax plaque may be carried in the mouth as well.<sup>79</sup> Archaimbault mentions that wax is put over the mouth.<sup>80</sup> A white shroud covers the corpse which is then lifted in a coffin. A spiky bamboo may be waisted through the coffin first, to scare away evil spirits. Traditionally the coffin was an oblong made of six boards stuck together with resin. It is placed on a bed made of banana tree trunks. Archaimbault describes quite an unusual rectangular coffin, shaped like an inverted truncated pyramid. In the bottom of this coffin a layer of clay and vegetable matter is spread out, covered with ashes.<sup>81</sup> An illustration attached to one of the translations of Abhay's article shows a rectangular shape in which a person can be placed in supine position.<sup>82</sup>

At night, during the wake, a candle is lit. During meal times some food may be offered to the deceased. Some traditional games are played, such as *Mak Thot* and *Mak Seuz Kin Mou*. It is a time during which there is considerable licence, especially in the formation of matches between young men and women. The coffin leaves the house via a side wall down a ladder made especially for that occasion from banana trunks. The ritual specialist

<sup>77</sup> Kickert, 'A Funeral in Yang Tern', pp. 79-83.

<sup>78</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, 155, Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 242, See also Thao Nhousy Abhay, 'Death and Funeral Rites', in Berval, *Kingdom of Laos*, p. 145.

<sup>79</sup> Zago, *Rites et ceremonies*, p. 243.

<sup>80</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, p. 155.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156-9.

<sup>82</sup> R. W. Habenstein and W. M. Lamers, *Funeral Customs the World Over*, Milwaukee: Bulfin, 1963, p. 98.

chases away evil spirits with food gifts or threatening gestures with his knife, water containers may be destroyed and the procession is formed. First come the carriers of the *khuan*s with a bowl of rice. According to Zago these *khuan*s are the deceased's, but Archaimbault's informants maintain that they belong to the people who perform the funeral ritual. Another ritual gift that may be carried at the head of the cortege is some glutinous rice and a duck's egg for the spirit of the cemetery. Buddhist monks and the deceased's son precede the bier. They touch a cord which is attached to the coffin, which is carried on a bamboo rack. Behind the coffin follow more Buddhist monks, the parents and friends.

The place of cremation and disposal is determined with an ancient rite in which an egg is flung away.

If the egg, when falling, does not break, the spot is already taken by a spirit and one has to make another throw. The place where the egg scatters will be marked with a basket containing a ball of glutinous rice.<sup>83</sup>

A similar use of an egg is reported for Zieng Khouang and for the region of Luang Prabang.<sup>84</sup> After the cremation the participants ritually purify themselves with a bath and a *khwan* ceremony.<sup>85</sup> The next day, or later, the bones are collected, arranged towards the west in the shape of a human figure and then re-arranged towards the east. Also there is a ritual washing of the bones. A symbolic meal can be placed at the foot of a tall bamboo pole at the top of which offerings and a white banner have been attached. The banner has small transverse bamboo slats. From this moment the dead person passes into the ancestor category.<sup>86</sup>

### Neua

Amongst the Tai Neua, the corpse is washed and then dressed in many layers of clothing, whilst guns are fired to chase away evil spirits and open the way to Father *Then* in heaven. The undertaker carries a sabre with which he slashes around to frighten away all evil influences in all directions. The dead person, enveloped in a cotton shroud, is placed in the coffin, made from two pieces of wood which have been hollowed out. Some money is also placed in this coffin. The coffin is closed, strapped and sealed before it is placed in an honourable place in the house, surrounded by the things the dead person loved most. Men will also have placed there the image of a bird, sculpted from wood, women have a sculpted banana flower. The bird or banana flower will later be set at the entry of the cemetery.<sup>87</sup> During the nights that the corpse remains at home, sacrifices are made and the ritual specialist recites the journey of the soul to heaven and all the circumstances of the travel. From time to time in this narrative he meets dangerous forces and chases them away by brandishing his weapons. For rich people this recital takes place frequently. There is a ritual walking at sunrise and at dusk.

The undertaker meanwhile finds a suitable place for the grave. At the cemetery ground he throws an egg at random until he says: 'If this is

<sup>83</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, pp. 158-60.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-7.

<sup>85</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>86</sup> Zago, *Rites et cérémonies* p. 252

<sup>87</sup> These and other details are taken from A Bourget, 'Funérailles chez les Thay', *Anthropos*, Vol. 8, 1913, pp. 40-6.

the right place, break !' If the egg breaks, it is indeed the right spot, else the egg has to be thrown again. A grave is dug and charcoal strewn in it, repeatedly to discourage insects from devouring the coffin and its contents. Others prepare the funeral hut, some two metres high, in which miniature household articles are placed, as well as objects which the deceased may appreciate.

When the coffin is lowered down, an opening is made in the house wall and a ladder, especially constructed for the occasion, must be used. The coffin has to pass over the deceased's prostrated children who must each hold a small knife in the hand. The coffin is carried on a bamboo frame, and each of the children fixes a lighted candle to the coffin, the candle's flame indicating whether the child's *khwans* are firm or disturbed. The coffin is inserted in the grave, enveloped in charcoal, and covered with some sand and three stones. The mortuary hut is placed on top and the wooden bird or banana flower placed at the entry of the cemetery.

After the funeral there is a ritual cleansing of those who have taken part in the ceremonies. That day the cooking vessel in the kitchen is turned ninety degrees so that the handles face the width of the room, rather than the length. Someone then goes to the cemetery with a chicken, ties it to a tree and then releases it. If the bird returns to the house, it is a sign of good fortune. Then this person takes a long piece of cotton, winds it around his head in the shape of a turban, with the two ends leading over the back and wrapped around the middle, and a bush knife is dangled from this ' belt'. He approaches the deceased's house and performs a short act during which the polite and proper ways of behaviour are stressed. Then the cooking pot is turned back to its original position.

An interesting ritual detail of the yearly sacrifice to the ancestors, which may be related to the Ancient Tai ceremonies, is that the bamboo sticks used on that occasion must be at least twice as long as those used during ordinary occasions.<sup>88</sup>

### **Black Tai**

Immediately after death, the corpse is dressed in new clothes and a piece of money is tucked away in the collar. Then the body is wrapped in a shroud and put in a coffin. At meal times the eldest son offers some food to the deceased. The next morning the village sorcerer comes to recite the long prayer to conduct the soul to the other world, all the time brandishing a sabre in each hand. A buffalo may be sacrificed for important people.<sup>89</sup> The coffin is let down through a side wall and the ritual specialist leads the way to the cemetery, carrying a pot with embers to light the pyre. There is loud ritual wailing during the cortège. The pyre is built on top of a freshly dug grave and the ashes drop into that grave. Some of the remaining bits of bone are collected and taken home and placed in a jar. The next day the jar is carried in procession to the grave, put into the ground just in front of the place where the incineration has taken place, so that a small tumulus results. This tumulus is surrounded by a small fence and on top a minia-

<sup>88</sup> Bourlet, 'Les Thay', p. 628.

<sup>89</sup> P. Lévi, 'The Sacrifice of the Buffalo and the Forecast of the Weather in

Vientiane', *Kingdom of Laos*, (ed. by R. de Berval) Saigon: France-Asie, 1959, p. 170.

ture house is built. Care is taken to provide this little house with many goods which the spirits may wish to use. Most of these objects are ritually destroyed. At the spot where the deceased's feet were during the cremation, a wooden pole of some three metres high is erected. On top of this pole an umbrella is fixed, with two protruding wooden slats. From one of these a long banner of white and red cloth hangs. On the other a wooden image of a winged horse is placed. Just under the parasol there is a packet of rice as food for the horse. Some of the deceased's personal belongings may also be attached.<sup>90</sup> Finally five pieces of wood are attached to the pole at equal distances so as to form a ladder. The *khawm* can thus climb the ladder, take the banner as a gift to the god of the dead (Father Ten) and, using the parasol as protection, mount the winged horse and begin their long journey.<sup>91</sup>

Amongst the Lao Song Dam, the Black Tai who have migrated to central Thailand, after the cremation, charred bits of bone are placed on a mat and these are ritually washed. A last meal is offered to the deceased, some bones are placed in a jar, and numerous silken threads lead from the bones to outside the jar. The ritual specialist selects a spot for burial of the jar by throwing bamboo sticks. If both sticks fall the same side upwards the site is not good and another spot has to be found.

A small rectangular field is then measured out and fenced in with small flame-shaped sticks. The jar is buried in the centre close enough to the surface to permit approximately 50 centimeters of the yellow leaf of silk yarn to protrude. On the ground over the buried jar a small straw-thatched house on posts is erected, and the yarn will be attached to its floor. The whole construction is actually a miniature replica of an ordinary dwelling house with compound.<sup>92</sup>

After the funeral, the Lao Song Dam ritual specialist will recite a lengthy formula in which he informs the deceased's souls which route to take to the old residence in Laos, careful instructions are given about the dangers involved, whom to pay for crossing the rivers and the like.<sup>93</sup>

### White Tai

In an ancient text of the White Tai, describing the early political history, there is a reference to a mortuary hut built by the four sons of a deceased Tai ruler.<sup>94</sup> Though this information cannot be dated with accuracy, it is an indication that the custom of making a hut over the grave is ancient.

A report dating from the beginning of the twentieth century states that immediately after death the corpse must be washed with water in which grapefruit leaves have been placed, then follows the dressing in the deceased's most beautiful clothes. Seven pieces of white cloth are placed over the corpse, and nine further pieces may be placed over the body, tucked under the chin. Rich people use a multiple number of pieces of cloth. A piece of money is placed on the chin, a fan in one hand, a handkerchief in the other. The coffin is provided with ash, charcoal, rice, rice wine and some money. The corpse is placed on top and covered with a lot of sago root.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>91</sup> Maspero, *Le Thailande*, pp. 268-76.

<sup>92</sup> Pedersen, 'Religious activities', p. 356. *Tho'*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 356-7.

<sup>94</sup> Roux, *Quelques minorités*, p. 383.

<sup>95</sup> *Sil Sathor, Le Laos et les minorités*, p. 211-2.

Whilst the corpse is in the house it is continuously guarded. When the coffin leaves the house, the deceased's wives and children lie down on the ground, their feet touching the ladder. The coffin passes over them and is moved back into the house again. Then wives and children reverse their position, now touching the ladder with their head and this time the coffin passes over them not to return.<sup>96</sup> According to Maspero the coffin has to leave via a special opening made for the occasion.<sup>97</sup> From the photographs of a White Tai cortège it appears that pennant bearers walk in front, followed by the coffin, a group of females in mourning clothes, and finally a group of people carrying the mortuary hut.<sup>98</sup> Silvestre mentions torch bearers, people carrying alcohol and food gifts, a group of close relatives, other relatives carrying paper pennants and umbrellas, the coffin, and finally all the remaining villagers.<sup>99</sup>

The grave has been dug in such a manner that the dead person will lie in the same direction as the other occupants of the cemetery. Paper money and cloth is laid in the grave before lowering the coffin. Earth is put over the coffin and a big stone is placed at the head and at the foot-end. On top of that is placed a mortuary hut, complete with bed and dining facilities. In the photographs provided by Maspero it appears as a considerable bamboo house on stilts.<sup>100</sup> Abadie mentions a straw roof on top of the grave of the White Tai.<sup>101</sup> The most elaborate White Tai mortuary structures are described by Durand. They consist of a tomb, made out of slabs of stone, surmounted by a house. It is clear that such tombs serve to house the most important family of the region. They represent the burial of the local aristocracy.<sup>102</sup>

The White Tai erect funeral masts near the grave. The most detailed study of these is by Durand. At the top of each mast he reports a big hat, which will be worn by the spirit who goes to heaven. On a perch just beneath the hat is a wooden bird, sometimes a banana flower or both bird and flower. The banana flower is considered to be food for the bird. For females, three rungs are also attached, but for males Durand counted sometimes ten, and sometimes twelve rungs. On the rungs, a multitude of stylised vestments, napkins and banners are fastened. Durand comments on Bourlet's opinion that the bird of the funeral masts is reserved for males and the banana flower for females and considers Bourlet's comment unlikely to be true, for the two symbols are often used together and do not appear divided amongst the sexes.<sup>103</sup>

The next day there will be a ritual ablution of funeral participants in the nearby creek or river. Before leaving the house for the washing, a stove is placed at the foot of the stairs with all the ashes carefully smoothed out. Upon the return these ashes are examined and if there are some traces it is interpreted as a sign that the dead person is reborn.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>101</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>97</sup> Maspero, 'Moeurs et coutumes', p. 241.

<sup>102</sup> Durand, 'Notes sur les pays tai', pp. 205-7.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238-9.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>99</sup> Silvestre, 'Les Thai blancs de Phong-Tho', p. 38.

<sup>104</sup> Silvestre, 'Les Thai blancs de Phong-Tho', p. 39.

<sup>100</sup> Maspero, 'Moeurs et coutumes', pp. 242-3.

### Red Tai

Immediately after death the corpse is washed with warm water which contains grapefruit-leaves and dressed in new clothes. Betel may be inserted in the mouth, the thumbs are tied to the big toes with white cotton thread. The face is covered with a white handkerchief and a white shroud covers the corpse which is laid in state under a mosquito net. The death is announced by several soundings on a gong or by gun shots and all the neighbours come to the house to mourn and offer some white cloth. At meal times the deceased is offered some food. In the evening the corpse is put in the coffin, which has been made from a hollowed-out tree trunk. Three pieces of cloth are placed under the body, and an uneven number of pieces of cloth are placed on top. The *khuangs* of living persons are kept away from the deceased and evil spirits chased away when the coffin is sealed. Whilst the coffin remains at home, a bamboo stick is fastened nearby in the roof. From the end of this bamboo dangles a small multi-coloured 'parachute'. This object, the '*khwans*' *haardo*', will be placed in the cemetery at the same time with the pieces of funeral clothing. Rich families may arrange lavish entertainment for the deceased's *khwans*. Just before the procession to the cemetery, ninety of the one-hundred-and-twenty *khwans* are guided by the ritual specialist to the other world. The coffin has to leave the house via the 'spirit ladder' especially constructed for this purpose. The coffin passes several times over the 'deceased's close relatives.<sup>105</sup>

The place where the grave has been dug is chosen by the eldest son. However, it has been reported for some Red Tai that they throw an egg and that where the egg breaks the grave is dug.<sup>106</sup> A mortuary nut is placed on the grave. After the funeral the house is sprinkled in a purification ritual. The house is placed in disarray and a village elder will come and notice the lack of proper order, especially the fact that the stove handles are turned ninety degrees around. Upon his advice, a neat household is restored.

### Tho

After a person's death the eldest son places betel, some rice grains and coins in the deceased's mouth, the corpse is washed with warm grapefruit water, dressed in beautiful clothes and placed near the ancestors' altar, the feet pointing towards the door. The toes can be tied.<sup>107</sup> The body is wrapped in a white shroud before it is placed in the coffin, together with various pieces of clothing and duck feathers so that the dead person may be able to cross the rivers of the other world. Other gifts which are placed in the coffin are pen, paper and some squares of cloth donated by friends and relatives. The coffin is sealed. During the wake there is ritual wailing and the closest relatives walk bent over as if they cannot stand up with grief.

The undertaker takes care to select a good spot for the grave for if the deceased is not content its spirit may come and torment the living. During the coffin's removal from the house the ritual specialist brandishes a sabre

<sup>105</sup> Robert, *Notes*, pp. 50-4.

<sup>106</sup> Bonifacy, 'Les rituels de la mort', p. 36.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, citing Father Camilbac.

to chase away evil spirits. When the coffin is carried out of the house it must pass over the deceased's children who crouch down at the foot of the stairs. The procession is led by a relative who scatters small gifts to roaming spirits followed by the coffin which is carried by friends and surmounted by a bamboo and paper house. The deceased's children walk crouched under the coffin, wailing all the time. Then follow the parents, the undertaker and the friends. The coffin is placed in a shallow grave, covered with earth and a stone. The funeral house is burnt on top of the grave. Three days later the children bring further offerings to the grave and construct a small straw hut over the food gifts.<sup>108</sup>

### Nung

The Nung wash the body and dress it. Some time later the religious specialist will lead the family to fetch water to wash the deceased's face. They carry a tall bamboo pole to which white streamers and a white flag are attached. It is called a spirit pole, and it is thrust into the ground near the water where it remains indefinitely.<sup>109</sup> The body is put in a coffin and a decorative paper covering is made to be used in the funeral procession. A goat may be killed as a sacrifice, and just before the funeral a pig may also be slaughtered. There is a wailing ritual. The coffin is carried out of the house and passes over one of the deceased's sons who lies on the road. The decorated covering is placed over the coffin and the procession begins. Men bearing large white banners lead the procession, followed by a money tree, paper houses and a paper horse on a platform, the coffin and wailing women. The coffin is placed in its shallow grave, paper gifts are burned nearby and then it is covered with earth. A small leaf shelter is placed over the grave. A banana tree with a paper figure of a person attached is planted at the grave head. After the funeral there is a symbolical cleansing of the funeral participants. Three years after burial bones are exhumed and washed, then carried back to the house, placed in a jar which is later buried in a different site, chosen by the priest.<sup>110</sup>

### Chung Chia

In a description of a Chung Chia funeral procession a riderless horse, the headdress of the deceased, his spectacle case, a fan, his boots and a bottle of alcohol were noticed.<sup>111</sup> The Chung Chia use a wooden coffin.<sup>112</sup> Seiden-faden reports:

At their picturesque funeral processions walk young hooded girls clad in pleated skirts of gaudy colours, having umbrellas held over their heads. Trumpets are blown, and the procession is headed by a Taoist priest. The mourners lead with them a red bull which is sacrificed on the tomb of the deceased...<sup>113</sup>

Three years after burial, the bones are dug up and placed in a jar.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Abadie, *Les races*, pp. 51-3.

<sup>109</sup> J. E. Saul, 'Nung Funerals' *Southeast Asia, An International Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 1, 1972, pp. 131-2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>111</sup> S. R. Clarke, *Among the Tribes in*

*South-West China*, Taipei: Ch'eng Wen, 1970, pp. 103-6.

<sup>112</sup> Lebar et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, citing Ch'eng, p. 230.

<sup>113</sup> Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples*, p. 63.

<sup>114</sup> Lebar, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

## ANALYSIS

In addition to the description in Chapter 6 of funeral practices of the Assamese Tai, information on such customs for fifteen other Tai groups has been summarised in the preceding pages.

*Washing*

A thorough washing of the corpse is reported for virtually all Tai groups and it may be safely assumed that this forms part of the Ancient Tai funeral ritual. Moreover, there are a number of Tai who place fragrant leaves in the water (Shan, Yuan, Thai southern Thai, northeastern Thai, Lao, White Tai, Red Tai and Tho) and it seems that substances which are normally used to make fragrant soap such as *comkrut*, *sapda*, or grapefruit leaves ought to be boiled in the water first.

Whilst a perfunctory ritual washing of the dead occurs amongst various other ethnic groups, the profuse and elaborate bathing seems typically Tai.<sup>116</sup> Only amongst the Jarai of Vietnam do we also encounter a thorough washing.<sup>117</sup>

*Dressing*

The custom of dressing the corpse in his or her own clothing is universal and undoubtedly forms part of the Ancient Tai funeral practices. It is shared with many other peoples in Southeast Asia.<sup>118</sup> However, the practice of damaging or reversing items of clothing seems to be typically Tai. Some Tai remove a button, others make a small tear in the material, some put a loincloth the wrong side up others turn it so that the knot sits at the back.

There appear to be two aspects involved in this manner of dressing. In the first place these actions seem a ritual destruction. This is also done to the goods the dead person may take to heaven (such as the dropping of the tray in central Thailand) or those which the deceased's *khwans* may use near the grave (such as the articles in the grave's miniature house amongst the Black Tai). Ritual destruction is also encountered in the breaking of water pots and it may well be an important aspect of the many animal sacrifices common during funerals amongst Neua Black, White and Red Tai, Tho, Nung and Chung Cara. By making an object such as an item of clothing unfit for the living it is reserved for the dead. Secondly there seems to be an aspect of reversal of the ordinary direction or sequence of events, symbolising that in the world of the dead, things are opposite to those in the world of the living. This symbolism is seen not only in the reversal of the clothes, but also in, for example the K'rao, the custom of washing the corpse from the feet upward and the winding of the turban in the 'wrong' direction, and the practice reported for the Tai of southern Thailand, of combing the hair in reverse fashion.

<sup>116</sup> H. H. E. Loofs, 'Totenkult im Sudostlichen Hinterindien in Verbindung mit Fruchtbarkeitsriten und Megalithentum', Doktordissertationen, Fribourg University, 1960, p. 52.

<sup>117</sup> *abandon de la tombe*, Travaux et mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, No. 52 Paris; Musée de l'Homme, 1949, p. 142.

<sup>118</sup> Loofs, 'Totenkult', pp. 52-3; Telford, 'Animism', p. 206.

<sup>119</sup> B. Y. Jouin, *La mort et la tombe*;

*Binding with cotton thread*

The binding of the corpse with cotton thread is reported for almost all Tai groups, as far west as the Khamyang, as far south as the Tai of southern Thailand and as far east as the Tho. Hence we may safely assume that we are dealing here with an aspect of an Ancient Tai ritual. The most common method of binding is to tie the big toes and the thumbs together. There are some groups where the ankles and wrists are tied instead and a few Tai groups tie, in addition to the hands and feet, also the neck (Thai, Tai of southern Thailand, those of northeast Thailand, and the Laotians), and some of these also bind the knees or the waist.

For a few groups (Neua, Black Tai, White Tai and Nung), for whom we have fairly detailed descriptions, no tying is mentioned, but possibly this is because amongst these the undertaker wraps the corpse tightly in a white shroud, thus ensuring that the corpse is immobile.

The custom is not uniquely Tai, it has been reported for various other ethnic groups in the region. It is generally assumed that the custom is related to a fear of the corpse and that the ritual tying was intended originally to prevent the deceased from interfering with the living.<sup>118</sup> The Tai may also have adopted the binding custom because of fear from the dead. In central Thailand I once observed the laying-out of the body of a murdered woman and noticed how the binding was performed with a more-than-usual care. On the other hand, the Tai may also have developed the custom in relation to their ideas regarding the dead person's *khwans*. The cotton thread may originally have been linked with the idea of tying the body's *khwans* together whilst the corpse had not yet reached its final resting place. Thus the custom may have been related to, or re-inforced by, the general Tai practice of tying the wrists of living people in order to prevent the loss of *khwans*, described in chapters 3 and 4. At least on one occasion there is a ritual detail which appears to support this idea. When the Lao corpse is put into its final resting place a near relative cuts the strings which hold thumbs and toes together.<sup>119</sup>

*Covering the face*

In the survey we have come across a multitude of face coverings. Chiefs of the Shan, Yuan, Thai and Lao may wear a golden mask, or have their face gilded with gold leaf. A waxen mask is mentioned for the Lao and Tai of northeast Thailand, a separate piece of cloth may be placed over the face amongst some eastern groups and the Thai. Sometimes the face is rubbed with turmeric, and often the face is covered with fragrant white powder.

The use of some formal face cover is thus fairly widespread, especially amongst the higher ranks. It is quite possible that wax and turmeric have been substituted as the poor man's version of a golden mask. On the other hand, turmeric is often used for medicinal purpose as an antiseptic and covering of the face with turmeric may be linked with a wish to preserve the body of the deceased. The fact that not only the face, but the whole

<sup>118</sup> Jouin, *La mort et la tombe*, p. 22, Loofs, 'Totenkult', 53, Condominas, *Nous avons mangé*, p. 295.

<sup>119</sup> Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, p. 157.

body is rubbed with turmeric indicates that the latter idea may be nearer the truth. The use of fragrant powder must be regarded as part of the dressing up, it provides an overall neat and pleasing facial appearance.

On a more general level, the use of a handkerchief, powder, turmeric, waxen mask or metal mask points to a desire to protect the face. Facial protection may simply be part of the undertaker's skill in preventing signs of decay and in repelling insects during the time before the coffin is sealed.<sup>20</sup> It is impossible to determine which, if any, of these techniques were used during Ancient Tai times.

### *Coins*

The gift of a coin is virtually ubiquitous amongst the Tai and appears to be part of the Ancient rituals. In most accounts the coin is placed in the deceased's mouth, but in a few cases it is tucked under the neck or simply put at hand in the coffin. Three centuries ago Gervaise reported coins placed on the mouth and the eyes and thus suggests the possibility that the golden mask used for Tai nobles' funerals could be derived from a custom of putting pieces of gold on the face's apertures.

The idea that the money will be needed when the deceased travels to the other world and when he has to cross a river in the process is fairly widespread. Apart from the overt statements regarding the river crossing, there are interesting ritual details apparently related to this idea, such as the waxen boat placed in the hands of a deceased Lue and the depictions of a river crossing on some of the Shan banners.

The custom of placing a coin in the mouth may not be regarded as uniquely Tai. It has been reported for Tai-related groups such as the Li<sup>21</sup> and the Laqua,<sup>22</sup> and for many other groups in mainland southeast Asia as well as outside this region.<sup>23</sup>

### *Candles, lamps and embers*

The evidence concerning the use of candles, lamps and pots of embers is not conclusive. Amongst many Tai groups no information was obtained regarding this aspect. Where information was available, the details differed markedly. Some groups place a light at the head of the coffin during the wake, others insist upon putting it near the feet; sometimes candles are placed on the bier during the procession, in other cases a pot with embers must be carried. Amongst some western Tai groups special attention is given to keeping alight a candle whilst the corpse lies in its final resting place.

It seems that there are several distinct beliefs at play. Firstly, candles are part of the paraphernalia traditionally used whenever the unseen powers are addressed. This explains for example why the Lao so frequently light and extinguish the candles during the wake. Secondly, there may be an element of guiding and helping some of the deceased's *khwans*. This would

<sup>20</sup> This last thought is not expressed in my article 'Tai Funeral Customs', in the following section, yet another possible origin of the golden mask is discussed.

<sup>21</sup> Lebar, et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> A. Bonifacé, 'Etude sur les coutumes et la langue des Lolo et des La-qua, Haut Tonkin', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient*, Vol. 8, 1908, p. 546.

<sup>23</sup> Loofs, 'Totenkult', pp. 75-6.

account for the central Thai prohibition in extinguishing the candle. It would account for the Ahom burial of a candle lighter with the king, and some of the torch-bearers during the procession may also be seen as guiding the *khwans*. Thirdly, amongst many Tai groups there is the custom of cremation. This custom, as we will see later, was probably introduced together with Buddhism and certain Tai groups must have known about cremation for eight or nine centuries. Amongst the Buddhist Tai the use of a pot of embers or a torch may have gained an additional meaning, namely that of the means of destroying the body. Fourthly, in the account of the Neua, it was clear that the candles there are associated with the firmness and strength of the *khwans* of the near relatives.<sup>124</sup>

#### *The coffin*

In general the Tai place their dead in an oblong wooden coffin. The only exception has been described in the section on the Lao, and the square coffin may be related to the wish to make a beautiful funeral pyre with a symmetrical construction on top. It may also be an imitation of princely funeral practices whereby the corpse is placed upright in a man-size urn before cremation.

In general Tai corpses are laid out in a supine position. There does not seem to be a general consensus amongst Tai groups as to the direction of the coffin whilst it stands in the house. The oldest descriptions of coffins all refer to a tree trunk which has been sawn into two lengths and hollowed out. After the corpse is placed in this tree trunk, the coffin appears to have been sealed hermetically with some plant materials. The layer of charcoal under the body in the Neua coffin may be designed to protect the body from attack by insects and worms, but also it may be designed to neutralise body fluids which may possibly be released.

Rajadhon's idea that the coffin originally may have had the shape of a dug-out canoe accords with the description of hollowed-out tree trunks. Possibly the idea of a boat was inspired by the belief of the deceased's passing the celestial river before entering the world of the dead.

It is quite likely that Ancient Tai funeral customs thus comprised the use of a hollowed-out log for a coffin and that this log was sealed hermetically whilst the body still lay in the house. The custom of placing the dead in sealed coffins is quite widespread in southeast Asia.<sup>125</sup>

#### *The wake*

From the survey of historical and ethnographic data it is clear that the custom of keeping a corpse under guard whilst it remains in the house is widespread amongst the Tai. This may be related to fear of the dead person and the custom of binding the corpse mentioned earlier. In addition, it seems reasonably certain that, at least during the funerals of important persons, some form of entertainment takes place, and for several Tai groups this involves a considerable relaxation of the rules of behaviour. The reported dances amongst the Thai, humorous plays of the Shan, card games

<sup>124</sup> These last two points were not noted in <sup>125</sup> Loofs, "Totenkult", pp. 82-5.  
"Tai Funeral Customs".

with forfeiture amongst the Lao and even the custom of a ritual tug-of-war can all be related to a measure of leontousness which originally may have included games between men and women. Often these activities are called 'entertaining the deceased'. It is possible that this inversion of ordinary behaviour simply forms the social dimension of the turn-about world of the dead, such has been displayed in the reversal of clothing, ritual destruction and combing the hair in the wrong direction.

In addition, there is a very widespread custom of ritual washing, often at the moment when the wake ends and the coffin leaves the house. This seems to be yet another aspect of Ancient Tai customs. The Tai share this formal expression of grief with many other peoples.<sup>128</sup>

#### *Leaving the house*

There are many references to Tai practices of confusing the deceased's spirit whilst the corpse is removed from the house. Deterrents and subterfuges vary considerably. Some people place an amulet over the door, others a thorny branch; the door may be camouflaged or sabres may be slashed through the air. Two of the most widespread customs amongst the Tai are the preparation of a special 'spirit ladder' with an even number of rungs, to be used only for the removal of the coffin, and the lowering of the coffin through a specially prepared hole in the wall. The latter two are widespread enough to warrant inclusion in the Ancient Tai funeral ritual. None of these customs is exclusive to the Tai. Both are part of a widespread set of practices undoubtedly related to the idea that the deceased's spirit is potentially dangerous.

The custom of destroying one or more water containers at the moment of leaving is quite widespread amongst the Tai. The origin of the custom is not certain. In line with the ritual destruction of other goods which are given to the deceased at various stages of the funeral, it could be that the water jars are presented to the spirit as a farewell gesture.

The prostration of close relatives who let the coffin pass over their bodies seems yet another formal, ritualised expression of grief.

#### *The procession*

The Tai funeral processions demonstrate considerable variation with regard to the order of people. Sometimes women walk in front, sometimes they walk both in front and behind the coffin. The ritual specialist can be encountered leading the procession, halfway down or near the end. Buddhist monks may lead, sit behind the coffin or walk further down in the cortège. Also there is no uniformity with respect to the mode of conveyance of the coffin. A coffin can be moved on a cart (in special cases in the shape of a bird), it can be carried on a bier or suspended from one or two bamboo poles.

Yet there are some regularities which may have bearing on Ancient Tai ritual. The custom of connecting the coffin or bier with a thread and letting some ritually superior persons hold this thread is remarkably widespread. Buddhist monks frequently can be observed chanting appropriate texts over the white cotton thread which is tied to the cords around the

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7.

corpse's limbs. In the eyes of many Buddhist Tais the function of this cord is simply to convey merit to the deceased. Nevertheless, the use of the cotton rope during the procession suggests a ritual pulling of the coffin and this could derive from a time when an actual heavy rope was connected to the coffin and many males helped drag the burden to the cemetery. Such a custom has actually been recorded for the Tai in northeastern Thailand. A possible order of the funeral procession can be built up from this core. First comes the ritual expert leading the way to the burial ground, possibly assisted in his efforts to deflect evil spirits and propitiate other unseen powers. Then follows a long rope with men on either side pulling the coffin. The coffin could be transported on a vehicle or a sledge, for the shape of some of the biers suggests a sledge origin.<sup>27</sup> The women follow the coffin, and the ritual touching with the hand, occasionally reported for the Tais suggests that they may have helped push the cart or sledge.

There are many different techniques for the undertaker to scare away evil influences, both in the house during the wake and during the coffin's transportation to the cemetery. Most prominent amongst these techniques are the slashing with knives and sabres through the air, and the waving of thorny branches through coffin or grave. The use of a weapon to scare away spirits may well be typically Tai,<sup>28</sup> and a waving of a thorny branch may also be counted amongst the likely aspects of the Ancient Tai funeral.

#### *Methods of disposal of the corpses*

Cremation is widespread amongst western and southern groups of Tai speakers, yet it is unlikely that this constituted one of the Ancient Tai methods of disposal of the dead. In the first place the custom is mainly practised by those Tai who have accepted the Buddhist faith, and Buddhism is a feature of post-Ancient times. Cremation may have been introduced as part of Buddhism. Amongst the non-Buddhist Tai with the exception of the Black Tai, burial is the norm. Secondly, even among the Buddhist Tai speakers there are many such as the Assamese Tai, who continue to bury all their dead whilst others bury at least certain categories of corpses.

Amongst the Tai who have accepted cremation, it is interesting to note that there are several who bury the ashes and remaining bones. This is reported, for example of the Black Tai. The custom amongst the southern groups of placing charred bone fragments and ashes under a pyramidal structure may also be regarded as evidence for a wish to find a final resting place for the mortal remains.

The most common method of disposal of the body is the burial of the coffin in a shallow grave. However, in the historical evidence of Siamese customs and in many ethnographic details of other burial customs it appears that there may have been yet another method, namely 'bird burial'. It is

<sup>27</sup> See, for example Archaimbault, *Structures religieuses lao*, p. 164, and Bunsoem Saatraphai and Sangkhiit Canthanaphoot, 'Adit Laannaa', Bangkok: Samnakphim Ruangsin, 1977, p. 81. Amongst the Shan there is a word for 'funeral sled' (Cushing, *A Shan and English Dictionary*, p. 601).

<sup>28</sup> The placement of a knife in the coffin,

as reported for the Lao, would be unthinkable in large areas of southern China, where there appears a strict prohibition against metal in the coffin (D. C. Graham, *Folk Religion in Southwest China*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 142/2, Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1961, pp. 39-45).

quite clear that abandoning corpses to the vultures has been an accepted practice in Siam for many centuries. In the light of the proven existence of this custom for the Siamese Tai it is interesting to re-examine other ethnographic data in order to see if birds occupy a special place in the funeral practices of other Tai groups.

The Assamese Tai often display a carved bird on top of the *taan khon* and believe that this bird helps carry the deceased's 'vital elements' to heaven. The Shan have an annual festival to commemorate the dead, during which they raise tall bamboo poles to which are attached baskets of grain and fruit and feed a multitude of birds with the contents of these baskets. There has been mention of a Laot in coffin in the shape of a bird, and wooden images of birds perched on poles are encountered in the cemeteries of the Tai in northern Vietnam.

Hitherto, anthropologists have considered these bird images to be nothing more than a depiction of the vehicle transporting some of the deceased's *khwans* to the other world. In the light of the Siamese historical data it is not too far-fetched to argue that in the past the birds may have been actually carrying parts of the body into the sky after having consumed the deceased. Following this train of thought it is interesting to see which *khwans*, from the Tai viewpoint are destined for the other world. Apart from the rather vague statement for the Red Tai that *khwans* of the head go to heaven, in the ethnographic literature only a single account was found in which a great number of individual *khwans* and their destiny after death are enumerated. This is a report on the Black Tai.<sup>129</sup> According to this source there are five *khwans* certain to travel to the country on the other side of the sky, namely those of the eyes, ears, heart, intestines and stomach, whilst it was undecided whether the *khwan* of the skull went to this world of the dead or to the ancestor's altar. The destiny of the *khwan* of courage and that of stamina was not certain, and all other *khwans* remained either in the grave or went to the ancestors' altar. By itself, such evidence weighs very little. However, when it is seen in connection with the frequent depictions of birds perched on top of poles in cemeteries, the feeding of birds to commemorate the dead, and the long tradition amongst the Siamese of abandoning corpses to crows and vultures it becomes a distinct possibility that at least for some class of the Ancient Tai people it was customary to leave the corpse to be pecked clean by birds. If this reconstruction is accurate, the custom of a second rinsing of the remains reported in several guises amongst many groups can be interpreted as a "survival" of what may have been a ritual collection and cleansing of the bird-pecked bones before they were interred, possibly in a coffin, but more likely in an earthenware pot, such as is still the custom amongst the Black Tai.

The active role of crows and vultures during funeral rituals is found in various other parts of Southeast Asia. It appears to have been one of the methods of disposal of the dead common in ancient Cambodia<sup>130</sup> and it was also customary in old Java.<sup>131</sup> Like many other aspects of funeral customs, the Tai appear to have this in common with other southeast Asian groups.

<sup>129</sup> Lafont, 'Notes sur les familles patronymiques', p. 807. <sup>130</sup> Southeast Asia p. 59. Pelliot, *Memoires*, p. 41.

<sup>131</sup> Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, p. 42.

The discovery that it was probably part of the Ancient Tai ritual can be posed as further evidence of a strong 'Southeast Asian-ness' in the Tai at the end of the first millennium and this should be considered in future studies of the possible origin of the Tai.

#### *Determining the exact spot for burial or cremation*

The Yuan, Lue, Lao, Neua and Red Tai share a custom of throwing an egg in the air and choosing the spot where it breaks as the place where cremation or burial may occur. The Black Tai group studied by Pedersen use bamboo sticks. The similarity in ritual detail on this matter for a fairly widespread group of Tai speakers make it likely that some type of divination to determine the proper place of the grave formed part of the Ancient Tai ritual. A variant was encountered also with the Ahom.

The egg-throwing ritual cannot be regarded as uniquely Tai; it has been reported for one of the other minority groups in Vietnam as well as one non-Tai minority group in China.<sup>132</sup> Nevertheless, the egg-throwing practice appears relatively rarely in the ethnographic literature and its occurrence amongst six Tai groups remains remarkable.<sup>133</sup>

#### *The mortuary house*

Descriptions of a Tai mortuary house are fairly widespread. It is apparent in the house-like canopy carried on top of the coffin, and in the various house-like constructions found on the Tai graves. For important people there are elaborate constructions and the Ahom tombs are probably the most spectacular Tai mortuary houses. We may safely surmise that there existed an Ancient Tai mortuary house and that this was intended to provide provisions for at least certain *khwans* which were believed to remain near the grave.

Again, it must be noted that a mortuary house is not uniquely Tai. It has been reported for a wide range of other peoples, especially amongst the non-Tai minority groups of Vietnam.<sup>134</sup>

#### *Gifts to the dead*

Apart from coins, given to the deceased so that he can pay the fee to cross the river to the world of the dead, there are many other gifts reported. Some are given to pacify the dead's spirit during the wake, others (often cloth) are placed in the coffin, others are displayed in the procession, or placed in the mortuary hut, whilst some are hung from bamboo poles. Most of these gifts appear related to the idea that the various *khwans* have to be provided with food and sustenance. Some *khwans* will have to travel, and apart from

<sup>132</sup> Loofs, 'Totenkult', p. 102.

<sup>133</sup> A most elaborate egg-throwing for divination has been recorded for the Khasi, people of Southeast Asian origin presently living in Northeastern India. The method, occasions and ritual implements differ in essence from those described for the Tai. For details see P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975,

pp. 221-2. Similarly, Naga egg-divination appears not related to that of the Tai described above. See M. Hotam, *Social and Cultural Life of Nagas (The Tangkhul Nagas)*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1977, pp. 49-50.

<sup>134</sup> Loofs 'Totenkult', pp. 109-11; see also E. J. J. Diguet, *Les Annamites, sociétés, coutumes, religions*, New York: AMS Press, 1975, p. 160.

money, need tools to start a new life. Other *khwans* will remain in and around the grave, whilst a third group of 'vital elements' are conducted back to the ancestral home where they will receive regular sustenance from the living.

There are frequent reports of animal sacrifice, and in the Ahom case even human sacrifice. Often these sacrifices appear related to the idea that the dead animal will accompany a group of *khwans* to the other world. A buffalo sacrificed at the cemetery may become the *khwan's* draught animal, and a rich man's horse may be killed to serve his master in the next world. Sacrifices can be seen as a ritual destruction to make animals available in the world of the dead. In this light we can also see the tearing of the deceased's clothing, the breaking of water pots, the ritual destruction of all the objects in the Black Tai mortuary hut, as well as the dropping of useful objects near the cremation ground in central Thailand. We may safely assume that the funeral of important people amongst the Ancient Tai comprised a series of gifts to the dead and that these gifts were ritually destroyed to make them useful to the deceased.

#### *Funeral masts*

Quite widespread amongst the Tai is the use of some kind of funeral masts. They are a main feature amongst the Assamese Tai, the Shan, the White and Black Tai and the Nung. This custom may also have survived indirectly in the long bamboo poles holding a cloth canopy amongst the Yuan, or the long poles of an honourable canopy amongst the Tai of southern Thailand. The miniature version placed in the hands of some Assamese Tai parallels the central Thai custom of placing short bits of wood in the coffin, just before cremation. A further parallel to bamboo poles can be seen in the extra-long bamboo 'chop-sticks' of the Neua festival to commemorate the dead.

Basically the poles appear related to the belief of the *khwans'* journey to the other world. It is, in our opinion, a remnant of the 'bird-burial' practice described above and may go back to a custom of placing the corpse on a high platform raised on bamboo sticks.

#### *Purification*

There are a series of interesting purification rituals performed by the Tai immediately after the funeral. Often these involve a ritual washing and cleaning of the house. Amongst the Assamese Tai a new kitchen fire is laid, whilst the Tai minorities in Vietnam often rectify a ritual disorder in the house, symbolised by a kitchen stove turned in the wrong direction. Although it is rather far fetched and there is little evidence for the idea, in my opinion the kitchen-fire ritual has attached itself to the 'turning of the ashes of the deceased' of the Tai who have adopted cremation. What originally may have been the Ancient Tai ritual of bringing order to grief-stricken household may have become a custom of turning the ashes and pieces of bone remaining after cremation.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>126</sup> This aspect of the analysis does not occur in 'Tai Funeral Customs'. On the other hand, it is also possible that the turning of the ashes goes back to the direction of the grave. There is some evidence that the grave ought to have its headend towards the east or the northeast.

Finally there remains the custom of throwing cloth three times over the cremation fire, reported not only for ancient Siam, but also for northeast Thailand in recent times. When I analysed funeral customs for the first time this item posed considerable difficulties. It was then thought possible that it was somehow related to the custom of letting pieces of cloth flutter from bamboo funeral masts. In the light of the Assamese custom of jumping through a fire after attending a funeral it seems more likely to have originally been a custom of purification which has attached itself to some cremation rites.<sup>136</sup>

### SUMMARY

It has been possible to reconstruct, with some measure of certainty, features of the Ancient Tai funeral practices.

a) Upon death the corpse received a thorough washing, and it is likely that at least in elaborate ceremonies the water was first boiled with fragrant herbs.

b) A coin was given to the deceased, and it is likely that this coin was placed in the mouth.

c) There were at least two methods of disposal: burial and exposure to the birds. Burial took place in the cemetery and the exact spot may well have been determined by throwing an egg. A third method of disposal, apparently used after some inauspicious death, consisted of floating a corpse down the river.

d) In the case of burial the corpse was fully dressed and it is likely that some face covering was used. The body was tied with white cotton thread. The coffin was likely to have been made in an oblong shape from a hollowed out tree trunk. In the case of important personages particularly, the coffin was hermetically sealed.

e) The wake was characterised by ritual games between the sexes. Also there was ritual wailing.

f) Various subterfuges took place to prevent the deceased's *khwans* from remaining in the house when the procession to the cemetery began. One of these was likely to be a spirit-stairway of an even number of rungs.

g) It is possible, but by no means certain, that at least for some important funerals the coffin was pulled on a cart or a sledge.

h) The coffin was laid in a shallow grave which was surmounted by some sort of mortuary house.

i) In the case of burials particularly a great variety of goods was probably given to the dead. Most prominent were pieces of cloth in the coffin and ordinary household goods, ritually destroyed in the mortuary house.

k) Funeral masts seem to be related to the disposal of the dead by offering the corpse to the birds. It is possible that the corpse was placed on a high platform and that goods hung fluttering from the rungs leading up to the platform.

l) After the vultures had finished their work, it is likely that the bones were collected, cleansed and buried in an earthenware jar.

<sup>136</sup> Compare J. P. Mills, *The Ao Nagas*, pp. 284-8.

- m) At the end of the funeral the living underwent a ritual purification.
- n) Many of the beliefs underlying the Ancient Tai funeral customs appear related to the ideas surrounding the fate of a human's many *khwans* after death. It appears likely that the *khwans* were considered to divide into three groups, one remaining near the ancestor-pole of the house, another staying at the burial place and a third group traveling a long distance, crossing a celestial river to the country of the dead. The ritual specialist was needed to guide the latter group safely to the other world.

### ASSAMESE TAI FUNERAL CUSTOMS RE-EXAMINED

The funeral customs of Khamyang, Phakey and Khamti, described in Chapter 6 can now be assessed for their 'Tai-ness', and examined for Ancient Tai features. It is quite clear that many aspects of Assamese Tai funerals have been found throughout the Tai region. The washing of the corpse, sometimes with the use of turmeric is typically Tai, and one of the reports mentions a reversal of the ordinary washing procedure by beginning with the feet. This is quite in accordance with many of the reversals encountered amongst other Tai groups. In the same light the wrongly wound turban and the reversed clothing can be regarded as typically Tai. The tying of thumbs and toes and offering of food gifts fits in the same pattern. Most Assamese Tai do not insert a coin in the mouth, but place some coin in the coffin and it is noteworthy that the deceased may be instructed to use the money for crossing the river. The coffin is of the Tai oblong shape and is hermetically sealed. After the wake is over and the coffin has to be removed from the house, the use of a special stairway with an even number of rungs can be regarded now as 'typically Tai'. Other features which fall in this category are the waving of thorny branches through the grave and the use of long bamboo poles, the latter sometimes provided with a depiction of a bird perched on the top rung. The custom of sending the deceased's *khwans* up to heaven after an interval of seven days through a ritual at the foot of the bamboo pole also falls into the general pattern established in this chapter.

Some of the Assamese Tai data have helped with the analysis of puzzling aspects in ethnographies of other Tai groups. Thus the ritual purification at a large fire and the participants' crossing of this fire puts into a new perspective the hitherto puzzling Tai rite of throwing a piece of cloth through the cremation fire. The Assamese Tai custom of cleansing out all ashes from the kitchen fireplace, against all ordinary rules gives additional perspective to the Red Tai's disorder of the kitchen stove, and, by extension, to the White Tai's bringing the kitchen stove out of the house. It has been argued that the Thai custom of arranging the exanted person's ashes may represent a survival of the same ritual disarray.

One feature of the Chalapithir Khawing burial practice which has not been found in any of the ethnographies dealing with the Tai peoples is the connection of the coffin to the ancestor's pole during the time the coffin stays at home. It is eminently suited to Tai custom, however, and the possibility that this represents an Ancient rite must not be excluded. If this is the case, some of the general Tai customs regarding a thread attached to

the coffin may have to be re-examined. It may also call for a re-interpretation of the cord attached to coffin or bier during the procession which we have thus far taken to be a sign that the coffin may have been dragged or pulled to the cemetery. Amongst the Buddhist Thai of Thailand a thread hangs out of the coffin and this is touched by Buddhist monks whilst they chant suitable texts in the evening. Before we proceed to such a re-examination of the facts we need to find at least some other Tai groups who connect the coffin to the ancestor's pole, for such an Ancient feature is unlikely to be so rapidly changing as to be found only amongst some of the Assamese Tai.

There is a second feature in the Chalapathar Khamyang burial customs which has not been found in any other Tai groups. This feature is the remarkable placement of the coffin in the grave, namely on the right side when it concerns a male and on the left for females. It appears to be a ritual reinforcement of the idea that the right side is connected with maleness and the left with female. This idea is quite widespread amongst the Tai in general. We have noted that when white cotton strings are tied around the wrists, the Assamese Tai bind a boy's right wrist before moving to his left and in the case of a girl the left side takes preference. During marriage customs a groom must sit on the right and the bride on his left when the couple is presented to the ancestors. Similarly, in an ancient medical Thai textbook it is stated that if a pregnant woman's right foot is red she will give birth to a boy, if it is her left foot the child will be female.<sup>137</sup> Whilst the Chalapathar Khamyang appear thus to stress an aspect of general Tai culture, the demonstration of this principle in tilting the coffin in one direction or another depending on the deceased's gender has not been found anywhere else and until the moment this custom is found amongst other groups it must be regarded as a local development, but based upon an idea which may well go back to the period of the Ancient Tai.

The burial customs of some Ahom priestly classes seem an excellent example of how a Southeast Asian set of customs has survived and evolved in isolation. Notable are the torch bearer, the waving of leaves through the grave, ritual destruction of implements, the egg-rituals at the grave, the burial house and the details of purification customs. All these fall into a 'Tai pattern'. This researcher only came across the two ethnographic studies regarding these traditional Ahom customs after having completed his analysis, and it is remarkable how the filling in of this gap reinforces the earlier findings.

<sup>137</sup> *Phaetsatsongkhro'*, Vol. I, Bangkok: Chetuphon, n.d., p. 50.  
Rongrian Phaet Phaen Boraan Wat Phra'

## 8

## CONCLUSIONS

In the course of this book various rituals of the Khamyang, Phakey, and Khamti of upper Assam have been described. In general these rituals have proven to be variants of Tai rituals which historians and anthropologists have described for many other Tai groups. In the first chapter an overview has been given of the early history and spread of the peoples who carry Tai culture, so that the relationship of the Assamese Tai with other Tai speakers has become clear. In most chapters of this book the stress has fallen upon life-cycle rituals. In the comparative survey of various Tai groups it has been shown that the Assamese Tai fit almost perfectly into a more general Tai pattern.

The rituals which have been dealt with cover birth ceremonies, puberty rites, *khwan*, marriage and death rituals. Many of the ritual details examined had never been described for the westernmost Tai groups. The paucity of information in the literature on the Khamti and Shan populations of southern Yunan and northern Burma is indicative of this. Since the Assamese Tai have been found to be such a rich field for the ethnographer, it is probable that any future research amongst their close relatives across the border with Burma and China will prove fruitful and rewarding.

One of the aims of this book is to use the "scala" of variants of specific rituals to try and reconstruct aspects of the Tai culture at a time when it must have been much more homogeneous than at present. It has been proposed to call the period at the end of the first millennium A.D. the period of the Ancient Tai culture. The Assamese Tai rituals have been extremely useful in helping to establish features of the Ancient Tai culture. The main reason for this lies in the specific technique adopted and described in the fourth section of the first chapter. The technique enabled us to test ceremonial details for possible inclusion into a reconstructed aspect of Ancient Tai culture. The main criterion adopted for the fourth stage in our method is the assessment of the geographical spread of a particular detail. If an aspect of ritual is found amongst Tai groups who, it can be safely surmised, have been effectively isolated from each other since the spread of the Tai peoples over mainland Southeast Asia and Assam, then that aspect qualifies for inclusion in the reconstruction of Ancient Tai culture. The Assamese Tai, being amongst the westernmost groups of Tai peoples, occupy quite a key position in this method. They may be assumed to have had no direct cultural contact with Tai peoples who live for example east of Laos or in central Thailand. The ritual details which the Assamese Tai have in common with Tai who inhabit regions many mountain ridges away qualify immediately for inclusion in the Ancient Tai rituals. Using this method in the preceding chapters we have been able to establish numerous ritual details as having originated from the Ancient Tai period. In the following section these are enumerated.

### **Aspects of ancient Tai culture**

With respect to birth customs, it has been established that the Ancient Tai had the habit of providing the woman who had just given birth with a fire, so that she could lie near it, warming her lower abdomen and back. The period of lying at the fire lasted for at least several days and it was considered to be primarily a medicinal practice, intended to ensure that the mother would emerge reinvigorated and strong from her lying-in.

It may be safely assumed that the child's umbilical cord was severed with a sharp piece of bamboo which was cut from some area of the house. Soon after birth, the child was rocked on a tray during its ritual introduction into the human world. It is quite likely that a male child was made to touch a weapon, a farming tool, or fishing implement, whilst a female child had to grasp part of a loom or some other instrument typical of female occupation. This was done in the hope that it would help the child develop into a valuable and useful member of the community. In addition, some time shortly after birth the child was introduced to the world at large. Probably this occurred at the end of the lying-in period when the child was first taken outside. The ritual included placing the child's foot on a piece of ground or a stone and exposing it to the day's first sunrays.

The Ancient Tai appear to have had a custom of using kin numeratives as prefixes before the name and there is evidence that this numerical system goes back to some southern Chinese system of counting, probably before the seventh century A.D.

In the literature on the Tai there has been found no evidence regarding puberty rituals such as teeth filing, cicatrices, ear piercing, nose boring or similar ways of ensuring that young people show physical evidence of having successfully crossed the barrier which separates children and adults. The only such bodily marking, which may possibly go back to Ancient Tai times, is the heavy tattooing of young men's hips and thighs. Another possible way of demonstrating adult status may have lain in the adoption of an adult hairstyle and headdress. In our survey of traditional ways of hair dressing it has become clear that in the most traditional Tai groups the women either pile their long hair up on top of their heads or they gather it on the back of the skull in the form of a chignon. Men traditionally wore a topknot on the middle of the skull. From all available evidence it seems that the Ancient Tai wore turbans. Women covered all the hair with theirs, but men left the topknot exposed. There seem to be two traditions regarding the colour of the turbans, western and some southern groups have a preference for white, eastern groups generally wear a dark blue headdress.

The comparative ethnographical and historical survey indicates that the elaborate wedding ceremonies of the Ancient Tai probably began with the prospective groom's family sending one or more go-betweens to the prospective bride's family. As token of their official status these negotiators carried betel and areca nuts. Some type of astrological calculation appears to have been customary in order to establish the compatibility of the young couple and the most auspicious moment for the subsequent rituals. During the negotiations details regarding the bride-price or the groom's service in lieu of bride-price had to be settled. There is no doubt that the groom had to provide bride wealth or work at his prospective bride's family in order

to make up to his wife's family for the loss of a daughter and to gain full rights for his clan over the future offspring.

The actual wedding rituals appear to have begun with a procession of the groom to the bride's home, wherein the bride price, some offerings to the ancestors and areca nuts were carried ceremoniously. On the groom's arrival at the bride's house there often was a ritual barrier put up and his party had to struggle or bribe their way in. Once in the bride's house the main ritual centered upon a presentation of the bride and groom, together with the bride-price, to the ancestors. This was followed by a ceremony of reassuring and strengthening the 'vital elements' of bride and groom, by binding their wrists with white cotton thread and their ceremonial consumption of some food. The latter probably included at least one egg. During this ceremonial the groom sat on the right side and the bride at his left. Later, the bride was brought in procession to the groom's family where she received a ceremonial instruction on domestic matters. This is indicative of the fact that she was transferred from the authority of one family to that of another. The groom's ancestors were formally told of the recent addition to the family.

The reconstruction of the Ancient Tai wedding ceremony establishes some important aspects of social life. In Ancient Tai culture a marriage appears to have been essentially a contract in which a family agrees to hand over one of its young women to another family. The bride thus switches her familial allegiance so that any children which may be born from the union will belong to her husband's family and clan. These considerations underlie the basic sequence of events such as the groom's payment of compensation, the leading of the bride to the groom's family home and her ritual instruction. The analysis of the wedding ritual draws attention to yet another aspect of the reconstructed Ancient Tai society, namely the existence of patriclans. The Ancient Tai were divided in large groups of people who carried the same clan name. They inherited this name from their father and it was strictly forbidden to marry a woman of the same name. Each clan was believed to be descended from a legendary ancestor and there is some evidence to suggest that clans had their own religious observances in the form of special days during which they were not allowed to work on the fields and had to observe other taboos.

In the course of this book various ceremonial treatments for sickness and physical discomfort have been encountered and some of the remedies were found to be so widespread as to warrant inclusion in the Ancient Tai rituals. One of these ancient rituals is the drinking of magically charged water. This is generally recommended for the woman experiencing difficulties during childbirth. Such a belief reflects something about the general Tai attitude towards magical power. It also indicates that it is probable that the Tai in Ancient times believed that some healing power may be added to water, a belief which has been common in Buddhist practices introduced in more recent times. Another ritual of a decidedly specific nature is the wiping-away of evil forces. A simple version of this therapeutic technique, found amongst several Tai groups, consists of stroking the forearm or palm of the hand in the direction of the fingers in order to 'extract' the evil forces which may reside in the body. A more elaborate version is also widespread amongst various Tai and is therefore likely to go back to Ancient Tai times.

This consists of placing offerings on a tray and circling these gifts over the part of the patient where he or she feels discomfort. The tray is then slowly moved towards the head or the feet, causing the discomforting agent to follow and finally to leave the body altogether. The tray, together with the evil force, is carried outside the village and abandoned.

A third type of therapeutic ritual which goes back to Ancient Tai times concerns the recovery of lost *khwans*, or 'items of vitality'. We have established that it is probable that the Ancient Tai knew of a ritual to collect one or more *khwan*s which may have escaped the body during a moment of fright or unawareness thus causing lethargy and lack of vigour. There appear two versions of making certain that the *khwan* returns to the patient and each of these versions is sufficiently widespread as to warrant inclusion in the Ancient Tai culture. The first one is searching the place where the *khwan* is believed to have escaped, gathering from there plant material or insects or simply scooping up some invisible entity, carrying the captured missing *khwan* to the patient and gently urging the *khwan* to enter its proper abode. It is likely that an egg was used during this ceremony, and that at the conclusion the wrists of the patient were tied with cotton thread. The second method consists of the summoning of the *khwan* by a ritual specialist who may send out his soul to search for the missing element and, after having found it, to guide it back to the patient. Again, it is likely that a wrist-binding ritual concluded the summoning.

We have established that *khwan* ceremonies are quite important amongst all Tai peoples and that these rituals can be important during various stages of life such as during a wedding, after giving birth, or after surviving a dangerous adventure. The nature of the *khwan* beliefs tells us something of the Ancient Tai perception of the human body. The uniqueness of the Tai *khwan* beliefs was described in some detail. In the first place the Tai appear to recognise a huge number of these *khwan*, the figures thirty and ninety frequently occur in the analysis of this aspect of Tai culture. Secondly, the Tai appear to view their body as having this large number of vital 'charges' noticeable in features such as the facial expression, the muscle tone, the stamina and the vigour of the individual. Every place in the body which may be suspected of possessing a seat of power is assigned its own *khwan*. For example, an eyebrow can move, therefore it has a *khwan* and similarly so has a nostril, a finger joint and a knee. Thirdly, the ritual of summoning the *khwan* whereby the ritual specialist sends out his soul in order to search for the missing 'vital element' suggests shamanistic principles. In the immediate preceding chapters ceremonies concerning the proper procedure following a death have been described. It was established that the Ancient Tai probably knew at least three methods of disposal of the dead: burial, exposure to the birds and throwing the corpse away in the river.

The first method involved a thorough washing of the corpse. The water was probably first boiled with fragrant herbs. A coin was placed in the mouth and the corpse was dressed in good clothes. It is likely that the clothing was torn or reversed. The big toes and thumbs were tied together with white cotton thread. Then the body was placed in an oblong coffin, made of a hollowed-out tree trunk, and, especially in the case of important persons who might have to remain a long period at home, this coffin was

hermetically sealed. At the funerals of important people, during the wake, there were ritual entertaining shows for the deceased, possibly involving games between young men and women. Ritual washing took place especially during the procession from house to cemetery. Various subterfuges were used to prevent the deceased's *kmawis* from returning to the house. One of these subterfuges consisted of removing the coffin from the house through a hole in the wall and down a ladder, especially made for that purpose. This ladder had an even number of rungs, which made it possible for spirits to come down. After the coffin had been lowered this ladder was destroyed. There are signs that important people were pulled to the cemetery on a cart or sled. At the cemetery the shallow grave was made fit for occupation by waving some thorny bushes through it thus dispelling unseen powers, and the coffin was then lowered. After the earth had been piled up a mortuary house was erected on top, and a variety of household goods were probably deposited in this house. These goods may first have been ritually destroyed so as to make them fit for the dead.

The disposal of the body via exposure to the birds appears to have occurred by placing the corpse upon a high platform. On the rungs leading up to the platform various pieces of clothing and food gifts were probably attached as offerings to the *khwans*. Some time later the bones were collected, placed in a jar and buried.

After a funeral there was a ritual purification of the living participants which may have included their crossing of a fire. In addition, there was a ritual disarray of household items.

The reconstruction of Ancient funeral customs led to an appraisal of the possible Ancient Tai ideas regarding life after death and the fate of the *khwan*s. In general it appears that the large number of *khwan*s divide into three groups. One becomes attached to the ancestor pillar in the house. Another group attaches itself to the grave and inhabits the mortuary hut, whilst yet others go across the celestial river to the land of the dead. Again, in some of the Tai rituals concerned with guiding the dead person's spirit to the other world, there are signs of shamanism.

Another related *kmuan* matter which appears to have been part of the Ancient Tai culture is the belief that rice has the 'element of vitality' called *khwan*, and that farmers ensure immediately before and after the harvest period that the rice's *khwan* is strengthened and helped to settle in the rice-storage house.

Various other aspects of Ancient Tai culture were mentioned in the course of this work. The first one concerns house building. In most Tai cultures there is a special upright post in the house which is connected with the ancestors. It can usually be found at the eastern side of the house. The position of the post determines some of the behaviour of the inhabitants. Anybody who sleeps close by the post must make sure that his body is placed in such a way that his head does not touch or face the ancestor pole.

Another aspect regarding Tai houses in general which undoubtedly goes back to Ancient Tai times is the fact that Tai houses are built on stilts. Amongst the Assamese Tai who are today adopting Assamese culture, only the oldest houses still rise ten feet above the ground. Usually the main entrance is found on the southern side of the house with a ladder leading up to a verandah. It is a common feature that the ladder has an uneven

number of rungs. This is in contrast to the 'spirit ladder' used during funerals. It is quite possible that the uneven number of rungs is related to a wish to prevent spirits from entering the house.

Finally we have noted that in various rituals left-sidedness is associated with the female principle and right-sidedness with the male. This is so widespread as to warrant inclusion in the Ancient Tai culture.

Whilst many aspects have thus been included in the reconstruction of Ancient Tai culture, several others have been rejected. This was done because there was not sufficient evidence, because they appeared to be a local innovation or because they seemed part of a more recent borrowing from a neighbouring culture. Thus the Phakey astrological lore regarding the days of the week and animal symbols was dismissed as a result of 'Indianisation', which must have taken place after the period of the Ancient Tai. Similarly, the use of metal scrolls to ward off evil and the ceremonial hair-shaving were dismissed as relatively recent introductions. Amongst the items for which there was insufficient evidence to warrant the label Ancient Tai we have included two of the three types of tattooing, namely the tattooing on the arm for medicinal purposes and the tattooing for invulnerability on the chest and back of the adult males. The latter custom, though widespread and thus theoretically qualifying for the label Ancient Tai, was excluded because it appeared to be part of ancient techniques of warfare and as such it may have spread rather rapidly in a region rife with armed conflict and physical danger. In order to qualify for inclusion in the Ancient Tai category we need further detailed early historical sources which identify clearly this type of tattooing and the ethnic groups amongst whom it is found. It can be expected that in the future, as more ethnographic data become available, various details of the Ancient Tai life-cycle ceremonies may yet be established. In this respect the author hopes that the ethnographic accounts of Tai speakers in southern China, to which hitherto he has only been able to refer via the summarised entries in Lebar *et al.* will prove helpful.

#### **The relationship of Tai culture with surrounding cultures**

In the introduction to this work it was stressed that a survey of customs of the great number of surrounding cultures cannot be done in a satisfactory manner by a single scholar. In order to form an opinion whether or not the features which may be traced back to Ancient Tai times occur amongst surrounding groups the researcher should have studied in detail the rituals of all neighbouring ethnic groups. However, it was possible to consult only a few of the basic sources on customs of the surrounding cultures. Even through this cursory overview it became clear that indeed, many 'typically Tai' aspects are also found amongst some surrounding cultures. The custom of 'lying-in at a fire' is found amongst Burmese and Cambodians, but there are signs that these peoples have adopted it as a result of contact with Tai culture. The cutting of the umbilical cord with a bamboo sliver is widespread in Southeast Asia and it seems that the Ancient Tai shared this practice with surrounding peoples.

Thus far we have not come across clear parallels of the Tai customs of rocking a recently born child on a tray, the ritual of letting it touch certain tools and its ceremonial exposure to the elements.

The use of kin numeratives has been interpreted as a sign of influence from the southern Chinese culture. Together with the ancient Tai system of time reckoning in cycles of sixty years, the kin numeratives appear to go back before the Ancient Tai period (it is the time we have assigned the label Archaic Tai). It must be noted that the influence of Chinese culture upon the Tai from the end of the Han period onwards is to be expected in the tentative historical framework drawn up in the beginning of the book. It is also possible that some of the similarities between the early Chinese ceremony of calling the 'soul' of a sick person and that of the Tai goes back to a period of relative close cultural contact between Tai and southern Chinese between the second and the seventh century A.D.

The rituals concerning *ca* 12 pairs of 'souls' are extremely widespread in Asia, but the Tai appear to share most ceremonial details with the Cambodians. It is not clear whether this is the result of diffusion from one culture to the other. The binding with white cotton thread seems to be a typical Southeast Asian custom, as is also the idea that rice has its 'soul' which should be summoned from time to time. The Ancient Tai culture demonstrates in these respects some profound links with Southeast Asian cultures.

The marriage ceremony of the Ancient Tai has not been subjected to a detailed comparison with other cultures. On first sight many of the details, such as the use of areca nuts and betel leaves, the sending of a go-between and the payment of a bride-price can be found amongst most of the neighbouring cultures. The same can be said of the reconstructed funeral customs in broad outline the Tai customs appear to fit in with those of many of the surrounding cultures. In order to establish the 'typically Tai' element of a ritual the smallest ritual details must be studied. It requires the collection of a great number of data and a painstaking analysis before, for example, we recognise that the number of between thirty and ninety *khwans* in the human body is different from that recognised by neighbouring cultures. Similarly, we need much further study and more information before we can say with certainty which ceremonial details appear to have been not only Ancient Tai but also distinct, that is, not occurring in surrounding cultures.

The evidence brought forward in this book is in general consistent with the tentative reconstruction of the earliest Tai history. In the Ancient Tai culture there are a considerable number of traits which also occur in Southeast Asian cultures. At the same time there is clear evidence of cultural borrowings from China. The latter borrowings appear to have taken place in the period of the Archaic Tai.

### Practical considerations

Comparing Tai rituals in order to determine which aspects go back at least to the end of the 1st millennium is a task which needs little justification. As a scholarly exercise it has its own merits. It is fascinating to attempt to understand what a certain people's actions and beliefs were at a time before they had adopted a script. Such comparative cultural studies are rare, probably because there are not many cases whereby a culture rapidly spread over a region where communication was difficult and which was soon divided

into many distinct units by various political boundaries. A situation involving comparison has been found amongst the Indians of India and those in Fiji or the Javanese of Java and Surinam, but it is doubtful whether there are any instances other than the Tai of a culture which spread in the border regions of six different countries and the ensuing societies of which became separated for at least seven hundred years.

This type of work is useful as an aid to researchers studying the early history of Southeast Asia. They may wish to comment upon, and hopefully improve upon the historical framework proposed here. The divisions between 'Proto-Tai', 'Archaic Tai' and 'Ancient Tai' are, as yet, extremely tentative and future findings may well make it necessary to adjust and revise these periods. The comparison of Tai rituals may also be of use to the prehistorians and archaeologists of the region. Firstly they might take note of the argument that the ethnic label 'Tai' may well lose its meaning as we go back in time. It is possible that during the first millennium B.C. there existed as yet no culture which deserves to be given the name Tai. Secondly, the aspects of culture which have been brought under the heading Ancient Tai point to ideas which can assist prehistorians and archaeologists. For example if they find the remains of a house which had a main staircase with an even number of rungs, it would be a point against the possibility that the house was inhabited by people of the Ancient Tai culture. This book may also alert an archaeologist who finds a grave in mainland Southeast Asia to look for signs that the thumbs and toes were tied together with cotton thread. He may try and test whether there are remnants of a facial mask, he may try to establish whether the corpse was once covered with a layer of turmeric or whether the clothing has been reversed. Since it has been pointed out that many Tai groups determine the exact spot of burial by throwing an egg at random, we may conclude that graves should therefore not be aligned in a regular pattern.

Other scientists who may find this type of study of some interest are the comparative linguists, who try to determine aspects of types of Tai spoken in earlier times using quite a similar methodology. Such linguists may occasionally be inspired by these ritual comparisons to trace Tai words they may not have been aware of before. Thus it would be interesting to see if the '*sonne khouan*' of the Laotians is indeed the same as '*soon khon*' amongst the Assamese Tai, or if the period of ritual taboo called *kam* amongst the Assamese Tai is related to the idea *kam* of the Tai Neua. The study of comparative Tai linguistics, just as that of comparative Tai ritual, appears still in an early stage. It has, as yet, not been decided satisfactorily what the basic characteristics of the Tai language were during the three periods labelled 'Proto-Tai', 'Archaic Tai' and 'Ancient Tai'. When the vexed problem of whether there is an Austronesian substratum to 'Proto-Tai' is solved, we will hopefully obtain a clearer picture of the 'origin' and possible route taken by the peoples who gave rise to the Tai culture.

Researchers who may benefit most from this type of study are anthropologists who wish to study Tai religion and Tai ritual. Hopefully this exercise increases their awareness, not only of the rich ethnographic literature available, but also of the scope and variations which have been recorded for the range of Tai peoples. For example, if an anthropologist has read chapter 4, and afterwards has the opportunity to attend a *khwan* ceremony, he may

note whether it concerns a simple *khwan* collecting or a summoning. He may also record whether the right wrist is tied before the left or vice versa. In general the anthropologist may be generally stimulated by the foregoing chapters to record ritual details. If such future findings lead to the filling of some of the lacunae, the book has served its purpose. If these finds result in their improving upon it, so much the better.

When dealing with non-western cultures, social scientists often tend to move directly from the stage of collecting data to one of final analysis. This is particularly so in the anthropological works that deal with Tai religion, where there is a tendency to interpret locally obtained data in isolation, without taking sufficient note of the range of other Tai variants that may have been recorded. Often such an anthropological 'final analysis' takes the form of telling the reader what the 'real' meaning is of the ritual detail, encountered in one village. For example, in an analysis of a northeastern Thai *khwan* ceremony an anthropologist notes the use of candles of a particular length, one of the circumference of the head, and another of the length from shoulder to waist.

The symbolism here as decoded by the anthropologist is the dichotomy of head and body, or spirit and body. The 'head' candles signify that the candidates' spirit essences (the chief manifestation of which resides in the head) should return and be attached to their heads; but the 'body' candles signify that their bodies become attached to the monk's articles and are dedicated to the service of monkhood as symbolised by these articles.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the principles behind this decoding by the anthropologist may have been, the results are not completely satisfactory. Why should the circumference of the head be chosen and not the circumference of the body? How is it that the 'body candle' reputedly is singled out to signify dedication to the order of monks? Why would the 'head' candle be excluded from such dedication? Why would a length from shoulder to waist be chosen to represent the 'body'? Is it a coincidence that the distance between shoulder and waist is virtually the same as the head's circumference? The author himself mentions that the 'body' candle, in another *khwan* ceremony may be called the 'candle of age'.<sup>2</sup> How can that information be 'decoded'?

The analysis offered in the above example may be valid for the community where it was recorded. In our opinion, however, it would have gained in depth if the ritual details involved had been scrutinised in other Tai communities so as to provide clues to a general Tai culture which shares much of its ritual symbolism and thus made the analysis more widely applicable. Our own survey in Chapters 4 and 7 would provide no other clues than that candles may be taken to symbolise the 'flicker of life' of a person's *khwan* amongst at least one eastern group, and that a dichotomy between *khwans* of the head and *khwans* of the body appears to be a recurrent theme in Tai rituals.

In a similar vein I criticise the tendency of some anthropologists to identify the Tai city pillar with a genital symbol, and argue for a more

<sup>1</sup> Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Origin and Meaning of the Thai City Pillar', *Journal of the Siam Society*, Volume 66, Part 2, 1978, pp. 159-71.

careful analysis of the evidence before proceeding to identify the underlying 'reality'. I have similar reservations when I hear that the Lao rocket festival may be an ancient phallic ceremony, whereby the shooting in the air is intended as a symbolical fertilization causing nature to be bountiful. Attractive as such ideas may seem at a first glance, the anthropologists would do well to make an inventory of the manifold ritual variations before proceeding with their analysis. For example, amongst the Tai groups of Kengtung state in Burma it has been reported that:

Fire balloons of giant proportions are inflated with hot air and when the balloons make their upward ascent, they are watched by hundreds of eager eyes; for to the tails of the balloon are attached squibs and fire-works which are timed to go off when a certain altitude has been reached and before stronger breezes carry them far out of sight.<sup>4</sup>

Telford has no doubt that these customs are survivals of old rituals of fire worship. Before we can choose between Telford's analysis and 'phallicists' we need to examine many more variants of this ceremony and weigh ritual details carefully. In my experience such weighing is a valuable aid in tracing which elements appear to be central and which ephemeral and it helps sift out those aspects which appear to be ideo-syncretic. Taking account of the range of Tai variants can thus be seen as one of the stages which can be useful prior to anthropological analysis.

In addition, the material brought forward in this book may be of use to the student of social change. It gives an indication of the variations of some common rituals that appear to have developed in the last thousand years. At the same time it can be noted that sometimes items appear to have been retained almost unchangedly. The number of rituals analysed in the book is too small to develop a full-fledged theory, but the material brought forward may suggest some themes. For example, an interesting area for the student of social change may be found in the development of marriage customs. If our reconstruction is correct, all Tai peoples once had exogamous patriclans and the bride had to shift her allegiance from her own family to that of the groom. Most of the Tai peoples living in the lowlands of Laos and Thailand appear to have lost these distinctive characteristics and we could speculate as to the social forces which caused this marked change. It could possibly be related to Mon or Cambodian influences, but other factors may have been at play, such as the radically different environment in the Mekong and Chao Phraya river basins where unprecedented numbers of Tai began to live in relative close proximity.

Another rich field, as yet virtually untouched, is the study of the introduction and acceptance of Buddhism amongst specific ethnic groups. As we gain a clearer picture of Ancient Tai customs and beliefs, partly by a process of eliminating 'typically Buddhist innovations', we can also reverse the process, beginning with Ancient Tai ceremonial, and establishing how certain Tai groups who came under the sway of Buddhism were affected. For example, there are many subtle changes, not only in the interpretation of Buddhism, but also in the 'original' Tai worldview as the two traditions intermingled. Such a study would throw light upon the particular local interpretations of Buddhism. To take another example, there are instances in central Thai Buddhism, whereby the monks' interpretation of the order's

<sup>4</sup> Telford, 'Animism in Kengtung State', p. 131.

rules diverges markedly from the official precepts.<sup>5</sup> Such discrepancies may be related to the influence of pre-Buddhist beliefs. Similarly, there are areas of Buddhist thought which appear to be wholeheartedly accepted by the rural Tai Buddhists, such as the belief in transmigration of souls. This may be related to the continuity of Ancient Tai conceptions of *khwans*, described in Chapters 3, 4 and 7, and various Buddhist beliefs. Thus the Theravada ideas concerning the non-Self and *akkara* would probably not appear too far-fetched to peoples believing in *khwan* and their travels.

All these lines of research depend to a large extent upon a satisfactory reconstruction of Ancient Tai culture. In this work only a few ceremonies have been analysed and many aspects of Tai culture have as yet not been considered. In the near future it is planned to carry out research encompassing further aspects of Tai culture, such as agricultural rituals, sacrifices and the Ancient Tai's system of time-keeping. A detailed analysis of those cultural aspects will further broaden our knowledge and appreciation of Ancient Tai customs.

<sup>5</sup> Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, pp. 128-34.

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